

## ***Revelation 17 & 18: Three Responses***

### ***Introduction:***

At the end of the Bowl Judgments of Revelation 16, we're told that that "the great city was split into three parts," and we see in our focus for today, Chapters 17 & 18, three responses to the fall of Rome by three groups: the "kings of the earth," "the merchants of the earth," and "all the shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea."

Let's get into it. I think this is one of my favorite sections of Revelation, weirdly, just because of the principles it speaks to. Let me pray for us.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***A Clear Picture:***

At the start of Revelation 17, John is given a picture of Rome, the great port city, which throughout Revelation has been called, apocalyptically, "Babylon."

Chapter 17 starts just as the final take on the sevenfold judgment against the world has ended. Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls are over.

And Rome has been personified as a prostitute, which let me say from the get-go is problematic, given that prostitution in our country and much of the world almost always begins by being enslaved and trafficked at a young age, not with some sort of moral failure. But for John, this is a great dig at Rome, because the city was named after the goddess Roma.

And the Revelation 17 passage that was read to us begins to direct us to what Rome and the Empire has done to the known world: “With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.” Rome, the Empire, has taken in everyone.

Because you can’t get away from Rome, can you? As far as far as anyone in the Empire was concerned, Rome ruled the world, and the whole world has been affected by her activities, which John lumps all together under the label of chosen prostitution that intoxicates her partners so that all they want is more of her stuff.

But she is beautiful. She is regal, right? She glitters with wealth, and drinks from a golden chalice--except that in it are “abominable things,” and “filth” and, in spite of her beauty, she is “drunk on the blood of God’s people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.”

Our brothers and sisters, right? Our families and friends! If we’re reading this for the first time, we see, again, as we’ve seen over and over, but here more clearly: Rome’s beauty is a glamour. The city embodies an alcoholic empire who is drunk on Christians blood.

### ***Unspoken Claim: Complicity***

And the unspoken claim here is that we too, if we partner with Rome, if we’re tricked by her shiny jewels, her expensive perfume, her exclusive clothing, then we will also drink from her cup and also get drunk, and what we drink and become drunk with will be the persecuted lives of other Christians.

John is saying a scary thing, which is that people who engage with Rome--even if they are duped into it, they are complicit in Rome's sins. They are judged for the partnerships that they have made with her. And this is made more explicitly in Chapter 18:

### **18:1-8:**

**1 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. 2 With a mighty voice he shouted:**

**" 'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!  
She has become a dwelling for demons  
and a haunt for every evil spirit,  
a haunt for every unclean bird,  
a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal.**

**3 For all the nations have drunk  
the maddening wine of her adulteries.  
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,  
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive  
luxuries."**

**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;**

**5 for her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes.**

**6 Give back to her as she has given;  
pay her back double for what she has done.  
Pour her a double portion from her own cup.**

**7 Give her as much torment and grief  
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.  
In her heart she boasts,  
'I sit enthroned as queen.  
I am not a widow;  
I will never mourn.'**

**8 Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:  
death, mourning and famine.**

***She will be consumed by fire,  
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.***

Listen. In this passage is the clearest expression of the whole point of this book that there is. This is John's main point. Revelation's thesis. Next time someone asks you—and I know they're always asking—“So, what do you think the book of Revelation is all about?,” turn to Chapter 18, v4, and read this:

***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;***

***5 for her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes.***

***6 Give back to her as she has given;  
pay her back double for what she has done.  
Pour her a double portion from her own cup.***

***7 Give her as much torment and grief  
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.  
In her heart she boasts,  
'I sit enthroned as queen.  
I am not a widow;  
I will never mourn.'***

God, through John, is saying that the Roman Empire is going to be judged, it's happening soon, and Christians, “God's People,” are supposed to “come out of her,” before it's too late.

### ***The Point:***

Now you know. We've spent months & we're not done, but this is the point of Revelation. “Come out of her, my people.” “Exit Rome.” Beg or Borrow to get away from Rome, because Rome will soon drink her own medicine, the blood in her cup, and if you've been to her party, you'll drink it

too. So Exit Rome. Exit Rome.

This is sobering, or it should be. It doesn't sober up Rome, of course; nothing has. John has been declaring this in some way or another the entire book, and there's been no response. Next week we'll look at what it looks like when Rome drinks the medicine they've been dishing out for so long.

### ***Responses: Kings, Merchants:***

If we continued on in Chapter 18 we'd see the "kings of the earth," those rulers--and by extension their people--who depended so much on Rome, mourn her destruction. Because of course, what do you do when the political and economic center of the world collapses?

We'd see the "merchants of the earth" mourn over the loss of all sorts of luxuries—birkin bags, craft cheese, granite countertops, shiny new gadgets—I'll I'll just read it:

***11 "The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore— 12 cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; 13 cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.***

***14 "They will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.' 15 The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn 16 and cry out:***

***" 'Woe! Woe to you, great city,  
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,  
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!***

***17 In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!***

The merchants mourn, because all their luxuries that they sold are lost with the collapse of the Empire.

### ***Responses: Traders***

And the traders, the people who brought these great luxuries from all over the world to Rome, the great port city, they respond, too:

***"Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. 18 When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?' 19 They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:***

***" 'Woe! Woe to you, great city,  
where all who had ships on the sea  
became rich through her wealth!  
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!'***

### ***Responses: Summary***

Rome was the political and economic center of the known western world, and these ones who have grown rich while she drinks, who have picked her pocket in her drunkenness and stolen jewels from her dress, they're finished, too.

But there's another response to Rome drinking her own medicine: The spokesman of the heavenly Temple shouts: **"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."**

And then in John's vision an angel tosses a huge boulder into the sea, and says this is what it'll look like when Rome goes down:

***"With such violence***

***the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,  
never to be found again.***

***22 The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters,  
will never be heard in you again.***

***No worker of any trade  
will ever be found in you again.***

***The sound of a millstone  
will never be heard in you again.***

***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.***

***Your merchants were the world's important people.  
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.***

The angel declares that all the industry and production of Rome will cease, all those business people who were so important and essential won't be important anymore. Darkness will take over Rome, and no one will be around to marry.

All because, all because, ***"In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's people, of all who have been slaughtered on the earth."***

***"Here it is! There it is!"***

And the clearest starting place if we're looking for application for today's passage is the statement that summarizes the whole point John is trying to make in this book, "Come out of her, my people."

Exit Rome, people of God.

The problem for us of course is that we're not in Rome. And this isn't a statement on travel, even if we could. The application isn't "Don't visit the Vatican!" or some condemnation of the Catholic Church.

If the best way we can apply this call is to try and exit—come out of—whatever “Babylon” there is today, we first would need to identify Babylon.

And since this was first written, the Church has done a really impressive, often hypocritical job labeling institutions—groups, countries, cities, ethnic groups, other parts of the church—labeling them as “Babylon.” I think it’s one of our favorite hobbies. We hang out, you know, and we’re like “I don’t like them over there. Let’s call them Babylon!” Because if this name was associated with bad stuff before John used it, after John got a hold of it, “Babylon” was shorthand for “of the devil.”

And of course, the Church—which has grown all over the world and been in all sorts of situations—is always finding new groups and institutions and people who seem to look an awful lot like Rome looked to John. Sometimes, the Church has chalked the whole world up to Babylon, and we’ve tried to make our own new societies and communities that are somehow entirely separate from the world. This doesn’t tend to work for long: both because we also know that we’re called to engage the world, share with the world what Jesus has done, and also, you just can’t get away from the world, you know? It has a way of finding you.

And this explains at least a little bit Revelation’s power: Even though John was talking to particular people in a particular place and a particular time, life on this earth is such that we are always seeing something that in lesser or greater degrees reminds us of the Rome we read about in this book. We’re always seeing something like Rome.

Of course, sometimes it's the things closest to us that look most like Rome, and just like John needed to open the eyes of his first readers to the real situation that they found themselves in, it's often the case that we need our eyes opened to the real situation we find ourselves in.

So maybe, instead of looking far away at some other thing that we could call "Babylon" and try to avoid, we should instead look really close by, at something we're daily engaged in.

And even though the church has always been doing this—shouting "Babylon's over here!" and "Babylon's over there!" and running all over the place—I don't think it's short-sighted or egocentric. I think in some ways it's the only thing we can do with this stuff if we're taking it seriously. We hunt out Rome's parallel, because we do take John seriously, even though we're so, so far removed from his first churches.

### ***Economics***

And let me propose something that is at best uncomfortable and at worst inflammatory or irrelevant. Sounds like a great choice, right?!

It seems to me that one issue that really floats on the surface of this passage is the economic reality of Rome. Rome was the center of the whole world's economy. More than anyone else in John's vision, it's the Merchants that lament her destruction, and after them come the traders & shippers and the rest. The "kings of the earth" aren't happy, but they don't get the complaining time that the people who are economically tied to Rome get.

So I can't help but think that the easiest application of this should have something to do with economics, with finances.

### ***Global Economy***

And maybe the Christian groups who equate Babylon with the whole world aren't too far off, in the sense that our economy is a global one. Not everything in the world is streaming into one place, of course, the way it all streamed into Rome for John: but things are tied together in a way that's similar to how Rome tied economic forces together. This is why we have what is, by all accounts, an economy that is unresilient, not resilient, to the Pandemic. One part falls, and all sorts of other parts—those parts that aren't bolstered in some special way—fall with it. And so every week for months and months, a million more people find themselves unemployed. Even though the economy of the world is not centered in one harbor town and tied to its fate, it is tied together.

### ***Consumption of Luxuries***

And remember that great list of “Empire Luxuries” that the Merchants went on and on and on about—I mean, really, it was a little bit too long, you know? Like the wares of the merchants, consumption of luxuries—I'm not talking about the things we need or the things we think we need—but luxuries—the best, the new, the rare, the shiny—consumption of luxuries seems to be as great as it has ever been in the world. This is true even in the middle of a global pandemic.

And we do think we “need” certain things to survive that we don't need, and our consumption of those things—it may not

be making wealthy merchants “the world’s important people.” But it is making wealthy corporations—which in America at least have personal rights like you and me, they are “people” under the law—our consumption of luxuries does make such corporations “the world’s important people.”

### ***Markers of Babylon:***

But we know that markers of Babylon are things like the persecution of Christians, which Rome was all wrapped up in, but even more generally, Rome is defined as the killer of “all who have been slaughtered on the earth,” as John says at the end of chapter 18.

### ***How?***

And if in at least some surface-y, economic ways our whole world is Babylon—or in some not so surface-y ways, there are parts of our world that persecute Christians and slaughter people—how can we possibly be expected to exit Babylon? Where could we go? Because we *are* the bearers of God’s “good news of great joy for all people,” we are the witnesses of what God has done in the world.

### ***Application: A Suggestion***

Here’s what I want to suggest: One very practical way we can “come out of Babylon” now would be to do everything we can to keep our money from being used by corporations—the world’s important people—or countries “the kingdoms of the earth”—that either kill Christians or “slaughter the people of the earth.” One very practical way we can “come out of Babylon” now would be to do everything we can to keep our money from being used by corporations—the world’s important people—or countries “the kingdoms of the

earth”—that either kill Christians or “slaughter the people of the earth.”

This would be a revolutionary thing, right? If every Christian stopped investing in mutual funds that were linked to arms manufacturers or maybe stopped buying items that were made in countries where Christians were not allowed religious freedom, if we stopped buying items from companies that were owned by hedge funds—great big investment companies—who also owned, say, cigarette companies or companies that manufactured abortion-related equipment or the chemicals used in warfare—what would happen? What would happen if we petitioned our 401k and public retirement plans to divest of things that hurt people.

We might lose some return on investment, maybe. But I think we would also come out of Babylon.

Wouldn't it be amazing if we just started a conversation group, where we gave permission to one another to begin exploring what it might be like if we pointed our wallets away from anything that smelled like Babylon? Because of course, it would take hours of discussion to figure out how to do that. (Although, let me say: there are conversations going on in churches around the world that we could join in if we wanted.)

But this might be asking a lot of us: we could lose some money, we'd have to say no to our wants a lot more, maybe. Of course, John was asking a lot of the people in his churches, too, right? Which is why he talked about how if you remove yourself from the Imperial Cult, you won't even be able to buy or sell in Rome anymore.

But if this is too radical, somehow, too much to ask, and we don't have the energy or the courage or the freedom to do it, we could do some other things.

***Application One: We could buy less stuff.***

We could buy less stuff. We could really figure out the difference between our “wants” and our “needs,” and support one another in saying no to luxurious wants. This is something weird to think about now, given how stuck we are at home and the ways we're entertaining ourselves.

We would all likely disagree—at first—about what is a “luxury” and what isn't, but if we could create among our friendships an atmosphere where we invite one another into the decisions we make about buying things, we would begin to be less and less influenced by the world's call to consume as much of the best as quickly as we can get it. We'd be better positioned to think about the reasons we have for buying things, and reduce the stuff we buy in the first place.

***Application 2: New Uses for Old Things:***

We can use old things in new ways.

We could imagine new ways to utilize what we already have. Or, acting even more like a church, we can share with one another things we have that we no longer need, so that others' real needs may be met.

Around us will always be a pressure for “the best,” rather than “the good enough.” But if we can take what we have, allow it to be “good enough” and use it in creative ways to meet our current needs, that would be so good.

We can reuse things that others think have been used up. I know how talented we are as a group: with creativity and help from one another we can fix almost anything, right? Used is almost never used up. So what do you have and what do you need? How can we share this information with each other?

### ***Application: Making Some Things New***

We can make some things new.

We could take things that really are broken or used up, and offer them to either one another, or other organizations, who can reshape them or remake them into really useful, helpful things.

I know that there are some of us who are especially gifted at thinking up new uses for cast off things, and we can help one another to find ways to bring new life to broken old things. We can help one another recycle all sorts of things--if we're willing to share with one another just what it is that we're needing.

### ***Conclusion: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.***

So, yes: if for any reason we are just not ready to move our investments into places that say no death, if we're just not ready to stop buying products that are made in countries where Christians can't worship Jesus without persecution, then we at least could reduce, reuse, and recycle, right?

What everyone despairs over when Rome falls is its cash and fact that the economic benefits that they were reaping from it are no longer theirs to have. If we are going to apply

Babylon now, we should look at the economic relationship that each of us have to places and institutions in the world that persecute Christians and add to the slaughter of people.

And the place to start is nearby and right now: How do we spend our money and how do we make our money? Whether the money we have now, or the money we hope to have when we retire. Where does it come from and where does it go?

Reducing, Reusing, and Recycling, for all the cheesiness of the suggestion, really can help us to think more deeply about the ways we have tied ourselves economically to terrible institutions and terrible places, to “destroyers of the earth” and “slaughterers of people.” We can't be “destroyers of the earth” or “slaughterers of the people,” even if our ROI is really good because of it.

Rethink “Cheap.” Rethink “Return on Investment.” For John's readers, there was an economic loss to their coming out of Babylon, an inability to buy and sell. If we financially remove ourselves from the places in the world that look like Babylon today, there will be a cost. Most of us are already so, so privileged, unimaginably privileged, given how many millions of people are newly out of work every week.

There's a cost to staying tied to these places, of course: for John, it was something like sleeping with a prostitute drunk on Christian blood. We may not have such a strong image, but we should not quickly ignore the moral choices tied to our money. If all we do this morning is remember them for a second, it's not a bad thing.

**Extras:****Chapter 17 Goes On:**

And Chapter 17 goes on to talk about how Rome will gather allies to her, this prostitute, who has thoughtfully and calculatingly chosen her profession. (And again, we could have a really powerful, corrective conversation on prostitution, johns, and slavery, here.) And people will join her because the devil is tricky and animates her the way a puppeteer animates a puppet. Rome's clients will join with her, "drink with her," will kill more of God's people. But God will work through even this situation, and these clients of hers, her allies, they will turn on her and they will be her downfall. God will subvert the devil's great plan, and as the Empire gathers more people to it, invites more people to take part in all the terrible things it does, it's those very people who will turn on her.