

A Funeral Song For A Prostitute

Revelation 18:1-24

Introduction: 1) What makes you cry? What causes you to weep uncontrollably?

What breaks your heart? I often say we will talk about what we love. I also believe we will cry over the loss of what we love. In this chapter we observe the world weeping over the death of a prostitute. Now it is important to understand this is a prostitute who was using others just as others were also using her. The people of this world were glad to let her use them because they became drunk with the passion of her sexual immorality (v. 3, 9). In fact, she made them rich, provided a life of luxurious living (v. 3, 9). But with her death, all was lost. All that she gave them was suddenly, in a moment, taken away. When it was too late, they saw that the prostitute, this worldly system of desires and idols, was a deceptive mirage. Sensual pleasures, material possessions, a life of luxury, the promises of power and satisfaction were completely, suddenly, utterly and eternally destroyed. Sin is deceptive. It will destroy and it will be destroyed. Security is not found in this world. Security is found only in Christ.

2) Revelation 18 is a requiem, a funeral dirge, a song of lamentation and sorrow over the demise and destruction of Babylon. Ladd notes that the OT [“background for this section is found in the prophetic dirges over the fall of Tyre (Ezek. 26-28)

and of Babylon (Isa 13-14; 21; Jer. 50-51)"] [Ladd, 235]. It is a song that has been sung through the ages by those who gave their all, everything to this world, only to be sadly disappointed with the results.

3) There is a modern song made popular by a singer named Peggy Lee, that could serve rather well as a contemporary commentary on our text. Its title: "Is That All There Is?"

I remember when I was a very little girl, our house caught on fire.
I'll never forget the look on my father's face as he gathered me up
In his arms and raced through the burning building out to the pavement.
I stood there shivering in my pajamas and watched the whole world go up in
flames.

And when it was all over I said to myself,
"Is that all there is to a fire?"

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends
Then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is

And when I was 12 years old, my daddy took me to a circus.
"The Greatest Show On Earth."
There were clowns and elephants and dancing bears.
And a beautiful lady in pink tights flew high above our heads.
And as I sat there watching, I had the feeling that something was missing.
I don't know what, but when it was over,
I said to myself,
"Is that all there is to a circus?"

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends
Then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is

And then I fell in love, with the most wonderful boy in the world.

We would take long walks by the river
Or just sit for hours gazing into each other's eyes.
We were so very much in love.
Then one day, he went away and I thought I'd die.
But I didn't.
And when I didn't I said to myself,
"Is that all there is to love?"

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep-

I know what you must be saying to yourselves.
"If that's the way she feels about it why doesn't she just end it all?"
Oh, no, not me.
I'm in no hurry for that final disappointment.
'Cause I know just as well as I'm standing here talking to you,
That when that final moment comes and I'm breathing my last breath
I'll be saying to myself-

Is that all there is?
Is that all there is?
If that's all there is my friends
Then let's keep dancing
Let's break out the booze and have a ball
If that's all there is

I. Stanza 1: God severely judges the great prostitute

18:1-8

Payday someday has arrived for Babylon the great (18:16-20). She is no longer great, for God put it in the hearts of Antichrist and his followers to destroy and devour her. Now there will be songs sung about her. Three dirges or laments are recorded in verses 9-20. These three songs are bracketed by two angel songs (2-3, 21-24) that demonstrate God's justice in taking down this arrogant and proud and wicked system.

1) This system is judged for its demonic nature 18:1-2

- John sees another angel sent by God ("coming down from heaven") who has "great authority," so great that "the earth was made bright with his glory" (v.1). Having come from God's presence, he radiates the glory of God. He has an announcement to make with a mighty or loud voice: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great" (14:8; cf 17:5). This proud and evil system of worldly desires, lust, pleasures and priorities is finished.

Though this is a future event, it can be stated in the past tense because its fall is certain. The repetition adds emphasis and finality. It is a signed, sealed and settled reality (cf. Isa. 21:9; Jere. 51:8).

- The great city is now nothing more than a haunt, a home for three things: 1) demons ("unclean spirits"); 2) unclean birds and 3) every unclean and detestable beast. Duvall says, "Rather than the honorable garden city that

God envisions, Babylon has become just the opposite; a desolate, demonic wasteland, completely devoid of image-of-God life” (233). Keener adds, “Becoming a dwelling place of demons is a suitable judgment for a power once mobilized by demons (Rev. 16:14; cf 9:20)” [NIVAC, 423].

2) This worldly system is judged for its idolatries 18:3

- Sexual immorality is often a picture of spiritual adultery. It communicates a love affair with the idols of this world. The nations are drunk in their passion for these idols. The kings or rulers of the earth have crawled in bed with these god substitutes. The merchants of the earth were seduced by the alluring power of her luxurious lifestyle. The peoples of the earth consort with the whore of wealth unaware of her infections and fatal diseases. The idols of this life have cast a spell over the human race and we bow and worship. Unless we are called, chosen and faithful in the Lamb (17:14), we have no hope of breaking the hold she has on us.

3) This worldly system is judged for its sinfulness 18:4-5

- John hears “another voice from heaven.” It is a call for God’s people to “come out” and separate themselves from the world. To fail to flee (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18) will result in 1) taking part in her sins and 2) sharing in her

plagues. Isaiah 52:11 says, “Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the LORD.” Jeremiah 51:45 adds, “Go out of the midst of her, my people! Let every one save his life from the fierce anger of the LORD!” Verse five explains verse four. “Her sins are heaped high as heaven.” Peterson says, “Her sins stink to high heaven.” And, she is not forgotten or unnoticed by the Lord: “God has remembered her iniquities.” He sees and knows all that the woman has done.

- Share in her sins and you share in her punishment. Stay with her and you will suffer with her. Her sins are piled up to heaven. They have reached heaven’s doorstep. God is fully aware of what the sins and iniquities are and who has committed them. Jeremiah 51:9 clearly is in the background of this oracle. There God says, “We would have healed Babylon, but she was not healed. Forsake her, and let us go each to his own country, for her judgment has reached up to heaven and has been lifted up even to the skies.” The time for healing is past. The time for fleeing is now.

4) This worldly system is judged for its pride 18:6-8

- The judgment of Babylon is repeatedly addressed in the Old Testament (Ps. 137:8; Jere. 50:14-15; Jere. 50:29; 51:24, 26). God will now pay back the wicked city of man for all it has done. In fact, she is to receive

double for what she did to others. The idea of “double the double” (lit. trans) is the idea of fully or completely. It could possibly convey the idea of pay her back for what was in her heart and what she actually did. Still as Ladd notes, The idea of rendering double for one’s deeds is an Old Testament idiom indicating punishment in full measure (Jere. 16:18; 17:18)” [Ladd, 238].

- Verses 7-8 extend the argument of her judgment. She glorified herself and lived in luxury. Therefore “give her like measure of torment and mourning.” After all, she boasted in her heart claiming, “I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.” Her sin demands righteous retribution because of her “self-glorification, sensuous luxury, and prideful arrogance, the very opposite of humble dependence upon the Lord and sacrificial love within a community (e.g. Prov. 29:23; Isa. 5:15; 1 Pet. 5:6)” [Duvall, 234]. Her boast recalls ancient Babylon’s boast in Isaiah 47:7-8 where the Bible says, “You said, “I shall be mistress forever,” so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end. Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures, who sit securely, who say in your heart, “I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children.”

- Because of her boast she will receive in “a single day” the plagues of “death and mourning and famine. She will be burned up with fire!” All of these is a certainty because “mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.” (cf. Isa. 47:9). No one and no thing can prevent her certain destruction. Her pride truly is her downfall. Osborne well notes, “one does not have to read many magazines or watch many movies to realize the extent to which sinners today guzzle “the wine of passion for immorality.” One must realize that divine judgment is not too far away. Those who willingly participate in such immorality will also participate in the judgment to come. Those who live for greed and luxury will also face an angry God for seeking only “the treasures of earth” and ignoring “the treasures of heaven” (Matt. 6:19-20). Jesus warned them well (and this includes materialistic Christians): “What sorrows await you who are rich, for you have your only happiness now” (Luke 6:4 NLT).” [BECNT, 659-60].

II. Stanza 2: The earth greatly laments over the great prostitute 18:9-20

- Whatever we hate will also reveal what we truly love. The earth-dwellers, those who lived for the priorities and values of this world, hated God and loved the prostitute. Consumed by greed and self-interest, its narcissism controlled its desires, its passions, its worldview. Suddenly, all that they have

lived for is gone, taken in a moment. It is more than they can bear. Yes, they mourn the death of Babylon, but mostly they sorrow over their own loss. To the end it is about me, not others.

- Verses 9-20 consists of three dirges or laments over the sudden fall and destruction of Babylon. The kings or rulers (vs. 9-10), the merchants or businessmen (vs. 11-17) and all connected to the industry of shipping (vs. 17-19) weep and mourn over the fall of their idol, their god. The words of these verses recall the words of Ezekiel 27 and the sorrow expressed over the destruction of the city of Tyre. Mounce notes “fifteen of the twenty-nine commodities listed in Rev. 18:12-13 are also found in Ezek 27:12-22. The same three groups of mourners are all referred to in the Ezekiel passage, although their reactions to the fall of the cities differ somewhat- the mariners cry bitterly (vv. 29-30), the kings shudder with horror (v. 35), and the merchants hiss (v. 36)” [Mounce, 331].

1) Rulers weep over her sudden judgment 18:9-10

The rulers of the earth went to the bed of the prostitute and were intimate with her. What she offered they wanted and gave their lives to. She satisfied their earthly desires with her idols (“sexual immorality”) and they “lived in luxury with her.” Her destruction (“the smoke of her burning”) causes them to “weep and wail.” The one that they once called lover, they

now remove themselves. “They will stand far off, in fear of her torments” (vv. 10, 15, 17). They do not run to her rescue because they were only using her as she used them. She might have been their lover but she was never truly loved. Fearful now of getting too close, lest they also are consumed by her destruction, they sing their song of lament, “Alas! Alas! (NIV, “woe, woe”; *Greek*, “ouai, ouai”; vv. 10, 16, 19), “You great city, you mighty Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.” The famous city, great and strong, is reduced to ashes by our God in a moment, in a “single hour.” Like the magnificent twin towers of the World Trade Center, this ungodly, Christ-less worldly system of idols and wickedness comes crashing down in no time at all. Shock and horror are the only words that capture man’s reaction. What they live for is suddenly taken from them. What they trusted in is suddenly gone and gone forever. These rulers played the fool, but they are not the only ones.

2) Businessmen and women mourn for their loss 18:11-17

- With the fall and destruction of this worldwide economic system, chaos ensues. New York, London, Tokyo, Beijing, all the markets of the world tank and bottom out. Stuff is available, but no one has the resources to purchase them. All “the merchants of the earth,” the Wall Street wizards, can do is “weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo

anymore” (v.11). Malls are empty. Shops are shut up. They never saw it coming.

- Verses 12-13 list 29 items of value and wealth falling into 7 different categories: 1) precious metals and stones (gold, silver, jewels, pearls), 2) fabrics for expensive clothing (fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth), 3) all kinds of ornaments and decorations (scented woods, ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron, marble), 4) Fragrances (cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, 5) foodstuffs (wine, oils, fine flour, wheat), 6) animals (cattle and sheep, horses and chariots) and 7) humans (slaves, that is human souls). Mounce notes that “it is estimated that there were as many as 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire” (p. 334). There could be no clearer evidence of the depth of the utter depravity of man. Souls of men were viewed as nothing more than human livestock for service and even entertainment.
- The fruit for which they longed and lived for, the return on their investment, gone! “All their delicacies and splendors, lost!” Indeed, all they have lived for is gone and lost, “never to be found again” (v.14). Interestingly this is the first of 7 double negatives in the remainder of this chapter. This one is actually a double, double negative. It literally says, “no more never to be found.”

- Like the kings of the earth (v. 10), the merchants “will stand far off in fear of her torment” (v.15). They will continue “weeping and mourning aloud” (cf v.11). Like the kings they will cry, “Alas, alas” over the great city that looked so fine (v.16)! Recalling verse 10 they are amazed that something so great, luxurious and rich could be “laid waste” in “single hour” (v.17). No one ever anticipated anything like this. We thought she would live forever; failing to realize only the one who does the will of God lives forever.

3) Shipping will grieve over her destruction 18:17-19

- A third and final group, “all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea” join the kings and merchants. Like their earthly companions they “stood far off and cried” at the sight of her destruction (vv. 17-18). They then ask a new question, “What city was like the great city” (see Ezk. 27:32)? This is reminiscent of the praise given to the beast in 13:4. Who could have imagined this? She was glorious but now she is gone. She was rich but now she lays in ruins. She was everything but now she is nothing. Wealth is great while it lasts but the problem is it does not last.
- Like the others, they weep and mourn (vv. 9, 11, 15). Further, “they threw dust on their heads” as an outward sign of their mourning (v.19).

They too cry “Alas, alas, for the great city.” We “grew rich by her wealth!” But... “in a single hour she has been laid waste.” David Platt is right, “If you love this world, it will pass away...and it will take you with it. You will not only lose true pleasure you will lose your life...you will perish with this world” (sermon notes).

III. Stanza 3: Angels rightly sing of the utter destruction that is the destiny of the great prostitute 18:20-24

Adrian Rogers says, “We become like what we worship. True worship will make us more like God.” We will love what He loves and hate what He hates. God hates the evil and murderous city of man known as Babylon and so should we. Thus, we have a completely different perspective on her judgment and destruction as verse 20 shows. We “rejoice” with all of heaven, the saints, apostles and prophets because “God has given judgment for us against her.” The prayer of 6:10 is answered. Rejoicing is not over the eternal and spiritual death of lost souls, but over the justice and righteousness of God’s judgment. And note: it is God who avenges not man (Rom. 12:19). The stage is set for the final stanza of chapter 18, a song sung solo, by a single angel. The refrain will become a familiar one voiced 6 times: “No more.” Each is a double negative in Greek.

- 1) There will be no record of her 18:21

A “mighty angel” appears for the third time (5:2; 10:11) and throws a great milestone into the sea. It plunges to the bottom never to be seen again, a sign of Babylon’s judgment and destiny. The great city will be violently thrown down “and will be found no more.” She is gone forever. There will be no record of her.

2) There will be no rejoicing over her 18:22

Music ceases. Harpists, musicians, flute players and trumpeters “will be heard in you no more.” Song and dance stop because there is nothing for the earth-dwellers to celebrate. An eerie silence envelopes the fallen world.

3) There will be no rebuilding of her 18:22

Craftsman no longer make their crafts. The sound of the mill and everyday labor stops. No one works. Industry is at a standstill. The economy has collapsed with an economic depression unlike anything the world has ever seen.

4) There will be no reflection of her 18:23

No one will have to turn out the lights on Babylon because “the light of the lamp will shine in you no more.” Darkness will drape the destroyed city as she is abandoned and forsaken. No one visits her anymore. No one parties here anymore. It is dark here, all dark.

5) There will be no recovery for her 18:23

The hope of new life, a rebirth, is not in her future. No one falls in love or marries anymore. “Weddings are a thing of the past. The merry sounds of bridal festivities have forever been silenced” (Mounce, 339).

6) There will be no respect for her 18:23

The prostitute’s judgment is just. Her merchants were filled with arrogance and pride as “the great ones of the earth.” Not anymore! And, all nations were deceived and led astray by her sorcery, her magic spells. She bewitched the nations and led them into destructive foolishness. Now that she is exposed, no one has any regard or respect for. Her merchants were great but not anymore. Her sorceries worked for a time but not anymore.

7) There will be no redemption for her 18:24

This whore is familiar with blood, but not the saving blood of Christ. No, in her the blood of prophets and saints is found. The blood of Christian martyrs that ran through the streets of Rome has continued to run through her streets around the world for more than 20 centuries (cf. 17:6). However, that day will soon be over. Their blood cries for justice like righteous Abel, and God has heard them. And, her guilt cries for judgment and God hears that too!

Conclusion

The Babylon of the Bible might well be called “Vanity Fair” today. Indeed, in poetic rhyme, Ella Wheeler Wilcox describes a world that promised much but in the end, delivers very little. Indeed she unwittingly notes that it is the brow with thorns that is the victor! Her words could be a commentary on Revelation 17-18.

VANITY FAIR

In Vanity Fair, as we bow and smile,
As we talk of the opera after the weather,
As we chat of fashion and fad and style,
We know we are playing a part together.
You know that the mirth she wears, she borrows;
She knows your laugh but to hide your sorrows;
We know that under the silks and laces,
And back of beautiful, beaming faces,
Lie secret trouble and dark despair
In Vanity Fair.

In Vanity Fair, on dress parade,
Our colors look bright and our swords are gleaming,
But many a uniform's worn and frayed,
And most of the weapons, despite their seeming.
Are dull and blunted and badly battered,
And close inspection will show how tattered
And stained are the banners that flaunt above us;
That comrades hate, while they swear to love us;
And robed like Pleasure walks gaunt-eyed Care
In Vanity Fair.

In Vanity Fair, as we strive for place,
As we rush and jostle and crowd and hurry,
We know the goal is not worth the race--
We know the prize is not worth the worry;
That all our gain means loss for another;
That in fighting for self we wound each other;
That the crown of success weighs hard and presses
The brow of the victor with thorns--not caresses;
That honors are empty and worthless to wear,
 In Vanity Fair.

Kingdom of Love and How Salvator Won by Ella Wheeler Wilcox.
Chicago, W. B. Conkey Company, [1902]