

# The Great One Falls

By Brad Allison on 8/22/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 18*

We're continuing our study of Revelation today, a book whose theme is to reveal to us the future. The first verse of the book announces this theme: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place." The reason Jesus wants us to know the future isn't simply to satisfy our curiosity, but to change us. By now, most everyone knows the basic story of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. A group of hobbits leave their home in an area known as the Shire, in order to go on a great adventure to save the world. After a long and victorious struggle, they return to the Shire and find it a different place, not because it has changed but because they have changed. The reader learns in the course of the book that Hobbit maps stop at the boundary of the Shire. They don't acknowledge any world outside their own, with the result that they become very narrow, self-indulgent people. But Frodo and his companions know of this other world, and this knowledge changes them. In the same way, followers of Christ know that there is a world outside our own, and we are changed by that knowledge. Our maps don't stop at the borders of the Shire.

What we learn about the future in the passage before us this morning is that Babylon, which represents the kingdoms of this world, is going to fall and never rise again. This knowledge changes us, and the passage makes it clear how it should change us. We are commanded, "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues" (v. 4). This command to come out of her brings up the whole area of Christian separation. The Bible clearly teaches that Christians are to be separate from the world, but Christians are not at all agreed on what that means. Christians have fallen into a couple of errors in their practice of separation. One is an over separation in which Christians withdraw too completely. A missionary friend of mine says that Christians are like manure—if we are piled up in one place, we stink, while if we are spread out, we do a great deal of good. Withdrawing into self-contained communities out of a fear of the world is to separate too completely. But the other extreme is to assimilate too much to the world, with the result that Christians become too much like everyone else. And sometimes we can fall into both errors at the same time, over-separating in a couple of areas while assimilating in others. What does it mean when the followers of Christ are told in this passage to "Come out of her"? That's what we are going to look at today as we consider three questions. Whom do we come out of? What does it mean to come out of her? Why should we come out?

## I. Whom Do We Come Out Of?

At one level, this is an easy question to answer. From whom are we to come out? Obviously, we are being told here to come out of Babylon, the city that God is about to judge. He is giving a big evacuation order to his people prior to the arrival of the hurricane of his judgment. But what is meant by Babylon? Does he mean a literal city with this name that will arise just prior to the Second Coming of Jesus? Or does he mean us take this more symbolically, as representing something else?

In order to answer this question, it is important that we remember the role the literal city of Babylon played in the history of God's people. Babylon was that great and powerful kingdom that conquered Jerusalem and the entire nation of God's people, Judah, and took her into exile in the sixth century BC. This is the exile described in the book of Daniel, in which Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are featured. Also, the city of Babylon was described extensively in long judgment passages in prophets like Isaiah

and Jeremiah. But most commentators agree that Babylon is symbolic of Rome and all wicked world systems. One commentator says it like this: “the Apocalypse’s Babylon is not just one Satanic nation but a corporate, depraved worldwide system spanning the ages from the cross to the final parousia” (Beale, p. 924).

What makes Babylon so apt a symbol for all the depraved worldwide systems throughout history is the methods they employed to conquer their enemies. Not content with military conquest, they also sought to impose their culture on a defeated land. In order to accomplish this cultural conquest, their common practice was to take the leaders of a conquered nation back to Babylon to teach them to think like Babylonians. Once their worldview and culture had become Babylonian, they would be sent back to their homeland to assume places of leadership. That’s what King Nebuchadnezzar was trying to do with Daniel and his three friends in the book of Daniel. And it is also what all world systems have done before and since, as they attempt to get God’s people to assimilate and lose their distinctiveness as God’s people. So Babylon represents this ungodly system which attempts to pressure God’s people to conform to it.

## II. What Does It Mean to Come Out of Her?

We have already said that the two errors Christians have made in trying to understand the proper kind of separation are the errors of assimilation and of over-separation. In general, the Bible teaches that we are to be in the world, but not of the world. That distinction can be seen in this passage as well. Christians are called not to be worldly, and that’s what is meant by this command in verse 4 to come out of her. But it is also clear that Christians are not completely separated from the world either. There’s a well-known passage in Jeremiah 29, where Jeremiah addresses the Jewish exiles living in Babylon. He says to them, “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (vs. 5-7). So we are to be in the world, but not of it. We are to be like a boat in the water. A boat is designed to be in the water, but water must not be in the boat. It must not separate itself from water and just sit in drydock all the time. But if water gets inside the boat, it means trouble. Christians are to be the same way: we are to be in the world but must not let the world be in us.

We still need to be a little more specific about the meaning of this command to come out of her. What does Revelation 18 teach us about what it means to be not of the world? What we normally classify as worldliness are the outward sins like sexual promiscuity, drunkenness and a spendthrift kind of hedonism. While those are certainly aspects of worldliness, the heart of it lies deeper. Verse 7 points out something of the essence of worldliness when it says, “As she glorified herself and lived in luxury, so give her a like measure of torment and mourning.” Those in this worldly kingdom of Babylon don’t believe God can satisfy them, so they set about to bring glory to themselves. They make themselves the center of the universe and take advantage of every opportunity to indulge themselves in luxury. The heart of worldliness is self-trust that acts as if God doesn’t exist, or if he does, he can’t be trusted to run our lives. So it’s really all up to us. Self-trust is the essence of worldliness, just as trusting in God is the essence of true spirituality.

So when God’s people are told to come out of Babylon, what’s meant is not to separate completely, but rather to separate from the heart of worldliness, which is self-trust. It is such self-trust that leads to all kinds of sins. Notice the language of verse 5, where it says of

Babylon that “her sins are heaped high as heaven.” The language there is reminiscent of the very first mention of Babylon in the Bible. Though in a slightly different form, the first mention of Babylon is in the Tower of Babel, described in Genesis 11. God saw it as a great evil when the people got together in order to build a tower up to heaven for the purpose of making a name for themselves (Gen. 11:4). Now, in Revelation, the last mention of Babylon in the Bible, instead of a tower that makes their name great, they get a heap of sins that makes their judgment great. The self-focused life is the heart of worldliness and leads to great sin.

Let’s apply this to ourselves. Do you see the worldliness of self-trust in your life, from which you are commanded here to separate? I saw it in my life recently when I became irritated at being inconvenienced by something my family tried. They purchased a piece of pottery at the thrift shop, with the idea of selling it for a profit on Ebay. I was opposed to the effort from the start, principally because I felt that it would somehow inconvenience me. When it turned out that it would, after the effort turned out to lose money, I became irritable about it. My self-centeredness was written all over it, and it ruined what could have been something of an exciting adventure for my family. So the kind of worldliness from which we are to separate is the self-centered, self-trusting life that leads to all kinds of sin, from the unbridled pursuit of luxury to anger and violence against those who we perceive as standing in our way.

### III. Why Should We Come Out of Her?

God is so merciful to us in showing us here the end of the road of a self-centered life. There is not much of a future in a self-focused life, because it will end in complete judgment and destruction. But there are a couple of things about this judgment I want to point out. Everything comes crashing down at the time least expected, at the height of power. Notice what Babylon tells herself in verse 7. “I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.” That’s an ancient way of saying that a person is living on easy street. In this culture, for a woman to have many children and a husband was the essence of the good life. She is a queen, which is a way of saying that she is mother of an entire nation. Her husband lives, and she will never mourn the loss of either husband or children. But notice also how her destruction comes upon her not only at the height of her power, but suddenly. Four times it says that her destruction comes upon her in a single day or hour (v. 8, 10, 17, 19). Why should we come out of the world and renounce the self-centered, self-trusting life? Because there’s no future in it.

There’s an interesting parallel to this passage in Daniel 5, which recounts the end of the literal kingdom of Babylon. The mighty king of Babylon, Belshazzar, decides to host a huge feast. One thousand nobles from his kingdom are invited to the feast, each one probably bringing with him a small retinue of his own. After the party has been going for a while and the drinks have been flowing liberally, a hand appears, with no body attached to it, and writes four words on the plaster wall where everyone can see. The entire episode scares sober the guests and especially their host and brings the feast to a premature end. All of a sudden, nothing becomes more important than interpreting these words which have appeared in such a supernatural manner. All the specialists in the kingdom are called in to interpret the words, but none are able to do so. After their failure, the queen, who is probably the queen mother, comes in and recommends Daniel for the task. They call Daniel and he is able to interpret the words, which mean essentially that Belshazzar’s reign and his kingdom will come to a sudden end at the hands of the Medes and Persians. After all that comes a twist at the end of the story. We read in the last paragraph of the chapter that Belshazzar was slain the same night of the feast, and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom. Think about that for just a moment. If someone other than a Babylonian took over the kingdom after Belshazzar was slain, what does that mean? It means that the Medes and Persians were just outside the city gates on the very

night of Belshazzar's feast. They were carelessly partying while the destruction of their kingdom was imminent. To use a more up-to-date image, they were travelling first class on the Titanic. Such will be the end of all who trust in themselves. Daniel had been offered a third of the kingdom if he could interpret the words, and he wisely refused the offer. What value is there in a kingdom that had only a few hours left? In the same way, there is no future in the pursuit of self glory in this kingdom.

## CONCLUSION:

I want to close with three applications. First, come out of the world by repenting of all self-centered living. Remember what Jesus said about this. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25). William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* includes the following Jewish folktale.

Once there were two young brothers who had spent all their lives in the city, and had never even seen a field or pasture. So one day they decided to take a trip into the countryside. As they were walking along, they spied a farmer plowing, and were puzzled about what he was doing.

"What kind of behavior is this?" they asked themselves. "This fellow marches back and forth all day, scarring the earth with long ditches. Why should anyone destroy such a pretty meadow like that?"

Later in the afternoon they passed the same place again, and this time they saw the farmer sowing grains of wheat in the furrows.

"Now what's he doing?" they asked themselves. "He must be a madman. He's taking perfectly good wheat and tossing it into these ditches!"

"The country is no place for me," said one of the brothers. "The people here act as if they had no sense. I'm going home." And he went back to the city.

But the second brother stayed in the country, and a few weeks later saw a wonderful change. Fresh green shoots began to cover the field with a lushness he had never imagined. He quickly wrote to his brother and told him to hurry back to see the miraculous growth.

So his brother returned from the city, and he too was amazed at the change. As the days passed they saw the green earth turn into a golden field of tall wheat. And now they understood the reason for the farmer's work.

To renounce worldliness by repenting of living for self looks and feels like lunacy to the outside observer. It seems just like taking a perfectly good seed and burying it in the ground, where it is certain to rot. But what actually happens is that it can only germinate and come to life there. The same is true of us.

A second application I want to make is simply to point out that you can only do this in community. When we are told here to come out of her, we are being told to renounce the jurisdiction of one community in order to take up another community. You simply can't renounce the self-centered life all by yourself. It requires being in community with others.

One final point I want to make is to point out how the gospel is the only power source that enables you to avoid both separation and assimilation. Separation and assimilation have something in common. They are both used as a means of self-righteousness, of feeling good about ourselves based on something we do or don't do. Those who are in to separation usually do so in order to boast about how they are better than that group from whom they have separated. Those who assimilate say, "I can't bear the prospect of your disapproval, so I will conform to whatever my culture tells me I should be." Whether you find your righteousness in being different from others (separation) or in being like others (assimilation), you have

forgotten the gospel. The gospel delivers from this because it pronounces that our righteousness is found in Jesus, and he gives it to us as a free gift. It is believing that that gives us the power to say no to separation and assimilation. May God help us to believe his gospel!