

Meditation: Study 5

A friend of mine was a lawyer before he was called to become a minister. He had a flourishing practice that he sold to help finance his seven long and expensive years of theological study. One day in the final year of his studies, after six years of frugal living, he was getting out of his shabby little car when the latest luxury Mercedes pulled into the parking space next to him and the lawyer who had bought his practice got out. On seeing my friend and his car, the man gloated, "Pieter, good to see you. Don't you regret selling your practice to me yet?" Pieter thought for a moment and retorted, "Let's speak again in about fifty years' time!"

We all live by making a basic choice, a choice that is an answer to a question: What do I hold to be more valuable than anything else? The question of values. My answer to this question determines the course of my life more than anything else. John is pointing his seven congregations away from a sinking ship. The way of life symbolised by the mighty Roman empire and her capital city Rome was an impressive and irresistible lure to many people in his time, but John warns against getting captivated by it. It would not endure. Politically it would still survive for some time, but this is not what John is concerned about. Christians could be loyal and valuable citizens of the Roman empire, with certain provisos, of course. John is warning them against the values and mores of the empire. This, John's vision uncovers, falls under the judgment of God. Yes, there are good things in Roman society too. In verses 22 and 23 we are given a whole list of good things that will be lost when Rome sinks into the mire of their own making.

When we see what John condemns in Revelation 18, we should recognize a warning against the sinking ship of secular Western culture. There are many valuable and good things in our culture, but we need to critically examine the values it projects into our lives. John focuses on two major issues: idolatry and an upside-down sense of values.

In verse 3 Babylon (a symbolic reference to Rome that compares it to the Babylon of the Old Testament) is depicted as a harlot. This is not a reference to sexual practices in the Roman empire (though that would certainly be deemed to fall under God's judgment too), but to idolatry. This was the way the Old Testament prophets referred to Israel's apostasy. When anything supplants God in our lives, it is idolatry. We live in a time when acknowledging God as Lord is at a low ebb. And when God is not the object of our veneration, something else takes his place. In Rome there was an insatiable lust for power and riches. When we hear the merchants mourn the destruction of Rome, this is glaringly apparent. But we should not make the mistake of vilifying anybody with money. The Bible does not proclaim that money was the root of all evil (as he is often misquoted), but that *the love of money* is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10). And so Roman society is not judged for being rich, but for its love of riches. It placed gold at the head of its list of values, while people were an afterthought. As we will see in next week's study, in the new Jerusalem people are placed first, while gold is merely the paving!

What we should take from Revelation 18, then, is a warning against fixing the direction our lives to the sinking ship of worldly values. The kingdom of God is coming. The risen Lord is putting God's plan for the world in motion and we are heading for the future God has prepared for us. Live towards the new Jerusalem and not towards doomed Babylon! That is John's message here.

Does this mean that God has already rejected most people in our society and that the flames of hell are awaiting them? No. As we will see in next week's study, the gates of the new Jerusalem are open day and night. All are invited. All are welcome. It is never too late to

turn away from Babylon and orient your life towards the new Jerusalem – God’s kingdom – by submitting your life to God’s rule and by practicing the values and the way of life of the kingdom of God. Pieter was not being coy with the lawyer who had bought his practice. He was sounding a warning and pointing the way to an alternative way of living, a much better way of living!