

## THE REVELATION OF JESUS CHRIST: THE REBELLION

The Harlot and the Beast  
Revelation 17

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*Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk." And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly. But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth" (Rev. 17).*

The last few weeks have featured some weighty material from the book of Revelation. We've walked through several chapters on the subject of divine judgment. In the sermon on Revelation 14, I invited you to live with judgment day in mind. As we covered Revelation 15-16, I encouraged you to consider whether you viewed the theme of judgment from the perspective of heaven or the viewpoint of earth.

It's important to keep in mind that Revelation isn't entirely dark and foreboding.

Let me give you a taste of what is to come:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:1-4).*

We're going to get there! There's coming a day when everything is made new. And new Jerusalem will come down from heaven with glory and beauty. But did you notice how John describes the radiance of the new city? He compared it to a bride on her wedding day.

This imagery is designed to create a more memorable message. Like many other symbols and signs, the apocalyptic imagery is designed to push the meaning deeper—beyond just our intellect and understanding. In the same way that music, poetry, and art create powerful statements, apocalyptic literature is meant to be more emotional.

That's why I've approached these sermons leaving some of the technical issues unaddressed. I don't want you to miss the point or to be like a grumpy wedding guest who stands to watch the bride come down the aisle, only to quietly say to his wife, "The wedding is already 10 minutes behind schedule." He may be right, but he's missing the point.

Revelation 17 highlights another powerful image with a strong message. In contrast to the bride, John shows us a harlot. And it's meant to make us uncomfortable because John wants us to see something: **the seductive and pervasive power of evil will be defeated.**

John could have merely made statements: "Evil is bad. Evil is everywhere. Evil will be defeated." But he uses shocking scenes and then explains the meaning so that God's people will be encouraged and warned.

### **The Scene (vv. 1-6)**

The vision in chapter 17 begins with one of the previous angels charged with the judgment of God speaking directly to John. This angel offers an invitation for a particular glimpse into how God deals with the problem of evil.

However, we find that evil is personified. In chapter 16, evil was portrayed as the city Babylon. We'll see that image emerge again in this chapter. But in these early verses of chapter 17 we see "the great prostitute who is seated on many waters" (v. 1). We'll talk more about the words "many waters" in the second point. Let's first consider something uncomfortable.

What's the point of the great prostitute? One reason is that the Bible often uses marriage or sexuality as a metaphor for spirituality. God often refers to his people as his bride, and he also calls out idolatry as adultery or immorality (see Jer. 3:9; Ezk. 16:32). The prophet Isaiah makes the following statements:

*How the faithful city has become a {harlot}, she who was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers (Isa. 1:21).*

*Thus says the LORD: "Where is your mother's certificate of divorce, with which I sent her away? ...for your transgressions your mother was sent away" (Isa. 50:1).*

Since there's a tendency to minimize the seriousness of rebellion against God, the prophets often used marital and sexual metaphors so that God's people would "get it" when it comes to the seriousness of evil. This kind of immorality takes intimacy and makes it transactional. Rather than sexuality being something expressed in the context of covenant, love, and exclusivity in the context of marriage, it's cheapened by making a person a commodity; something to be bought. A selfless gift is exchanged for a self-centered purchase.

This should be repulsive, but there's an element of enticement that's also troubling. Immorality lays a trap of seductive. Proverbs 5 says it bluntly:

*For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol... (Prov. 5:3-5).*

We'll see this exterior allurements later in the text. This metaphor is here to make us sit up and listen more closely. It's in this text to show and warn us about the serious and seductive nature of evil that God is going to judge.

Revelation 17 wants us to feel the significance of evil, and it also wants to highlight the pervasiveness of it.

Verse 2 connects the kings of the earth into this scandal, describing them as "committing sexual immorality." Nations and leaders are in mind here. What's more, the metaphor shifts a bit as 2b says, "...and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers of the earth have become drunk."

Take note that the immoral relationship of the kings of the earth has caused the people of the earth to lose their minds. The world is intoxicated with evil. This apocalyptic vision shocks us into realizing what the world is really like. This vision isn't simply about immorality and drunkenness. It's about the pervasive and seductive power of rebellion against God.

Is that what you see? One goal of this book is to help you, Christian, understand that future so that you can endure until the end. But another goal is to awaken your spiritual senses to where we really live and what is really going on. Do you sense that happening through this book? I hope so. Because to understand and appreciate this part of the vision in Revelation 17 would mean a greater awareness of

the seduction and pervasiveness of sin in our world. And since it's widespread and appealing to our fleshly instincts, we need a blunt image to wake us up and remind us what's really going on.

The vision continues in verse 3 as John is carried into a wilderness where he saw a woman sitting on a scarlet Beast. This is the same Beast that emerged from the sea in chapter 13—the Antichrist. The great prostitute and the Antichrist are connected.

Verse 4 tells us more about her attire: purple and scarlet clothing with gold, jewels, and pearls. She also had a bowl, but it's filled with all kinds of evil. What's more, we read about a description on her forehead: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."

This woman is Babylon, a metaphorical name for the nexus of demonic forces and earthly kingdoms. It's like the Beast/Antichrist, but this woman represents the spirit of the kingdom. Take note that Babylon is described as a multiplier and source of evil; "mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."

Finally, verse 6 tells us that the spirit of Babylon is drunk with "the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." No doubt John and his readers had the Roman Empire in mind when they read this and for good reason. But this doesn't just apply to Rome. It applies to any kingdom, nation, or government characterized by idolatry, immorality, luxury, and persecution.<sup>1</sup>

This scene is designed to be shocking and alarming. Understanding the imagery should create some uncomfortable feelings. And it should also wake us up to the world in which we live—a place filled with ambient seduction and pervasive evil.

### **The Meaning (vv. 7-18)**

The second half of chapter 17 seeks to explain the meaning of the previous six verses and to even highlight their spiritual significance related to God's judgment.

Verse 6b is a personal account as John tells us that this previous vision made him marvel. That may not be a strong enough word. You might think of the word "stunned" or "shocked." That might be a bit closer to what John is experiencing.

However, an angel intervenes in verse 7, telling John that he will tell John the mystery of the woman and the Beast. Yet, we're going to read a lot more about the Beast in what follows. And I think it's because of what I said earlier about the woman being the spirit of the beast. John's focus is turned specifically to the Beast.

We read, in verse 8, about the Beast who "was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction." This is likely to highlight what we saw in chapter 13 with the Beast having a mortal wound and yet is now alive. The Antichrist captures the world's attention with demonic narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 613.

that parallels the death and resurrection of Jesus. Back in Revelation 1:4 we read: “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come...” But in the case of the Beast/Antichrist, his copying of Jesus only leads to judgment.

There’s a call for wisdom in verse 9 as John identifies the seven heads as seven mountains upon which the woman is seated. Most commentators see this as a reference to Rome since the city featured seven hills or mountains. But that doesn’t limit the meaning to only Rome. Some see this as merely representative of all earthly kingdoms. Others see it as a prediction of a reconstituted Roman Empire in the future. Rome was the new Babylon, and it was the clearest real-time example of a nation “bent on its own blasphemous way, opposing with all its might the things of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Seven kings are mentioned in verse 10. Some take this to be the literal emperors of Rome. Others believe it’s representative of the seven earthly kingdoms. Still more believe this to be a perfect number, symbolizing the completeness of the rebellion. Regardless, verse 11 seems to be the main point—the Beast follows suit with them. The Antichrist uses earthy power to enact the will of the devil.

The Beast’s reign will empower other leaders (v. 12), and they will form a brief alliance. According to verse 13, these ten rulers eventually hand over their power and authority to the Beast. They are “of one mind.” For what purpose?

*They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Rev. 17:14).*

We’ll come back to this verse at the end. For now, just note the certain victory.

There’s more to understand in the meaning of this vision. In verse 15, the angel explains the waters upon which the prostitute sat in verse 1. They represent “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” It’s a sea of people. The unruly, chaotic, evil-producing sea is representative of human beings.

The unholy alliance self-destructs. Evil always finds ways to be even more evil. Verse 16 highlights the ten kings, and the Beast will hate the prostitute. They destroy her. The forces of evil are turning against each other. That’s interesting and predictable, isn’t it? Evil is destructive to everyone involved. It destroys everything, including its host.

But we also see that this is no accident. Verse 17 tells us that this is part of the judgment of God. Take note that evil is still within the boundaries of God’s control. The Beast may look powerful and evil may be pervasive, but there’s something more foundational: the will and word of God. Evil will be used to enact the judgment of God—even on evil itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, [\*Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 201.

The concluding verse provides a repetition of what the woman represents. Verse 18 says that the woman is “the great city that has dominion over kings of the earth.” The implication must have been Rome. But that was only the most obvious expression of the spirit of Babylon. This concern didn’t end with the collapse of the Roman Empire. The seduction and pervasiveness of evil reach far beyond the rise and fall of Rome.

The reason this verse is placed here is to provide a bookend to this chapter. It began with the sign of a woman sitting on a scarlet Beast with blasphemous names on her head (17:3). And it ends with a clear meaning in John’s day: It’s the great city, the place that put John on Patmos in the first place.

This will lead to chapter 18 with a deeper reflection on the collapse of evil—the fall of Babylon.

### **What Now?**

I’ve spent the majority of this sermon unpacking the scene in Revelation 17 and its meaning. Let me now draw a few applications to consider.

#### **1. Remember the seductive and pervasive nature of evil.**

I hope that the imagery of this passage will serve as a warning. Evil is seductive. It doesn’t look like a disaster. It looks attractive and appealing. Its pull is strong. It creates counterfeits to what is right, honorable, and pure. And you’ve got to understand this because everything in our culture and world is moving toward the full acceptance and ingestion of what is contrary to God.

#### **2. Understand that evil resides in both people and societies.**

Sin is certainly individual. People do terrible things. But that’s not the only problem. Sin is a part of every culture, society, and man-made system. These reflect the spirit of Babylon.

*Every great center of power that has prostituted its wealth and influences restores to life the spirit of ancient Babylon. The repulsive immorality, idolatry, luxury, and misuse of power that characterized Rome has been reproduced many times throughout history; and we must all recognize the same depravity in our way of life today.<sup>3</sup>*

#### **3. Take refuge in the Lord of lords and King of kings.**

If you truly feel the implications of this passage, it should make you realize that there’s no hope in you or in anything human beings can create. The only hope for human beings is a divine rescue operation where both humans and society are freed from the pervasive and seductive power of sin.

Evil is so bad that our only hope is a deliverance bought by Jesus, anchored in God’s sovereignty, and guaranteed by God’s will. The hope for the future is in him who was, who is, and who is to come.

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<sup>3</sup> Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 628.

The seductive and pervasive power of evil will be defeated!

*They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (Rev. 17:14).*

Christian, do you hear your hope? If you are with Christ, you are “called and chosen and faithful.”

The seductive and pervasive power of evil is defeated by the power of the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

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