

## **FALLEN! FALLEN! IS BABYLON THE GREAT!**

The Victory of the Lamb, part 12: Revelation 17  
Stonebrook Sunday AM, 4/2/23, Matt Heerema

Please open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 17. We are now down the home stretch of this great book. We're on week 12 of 16 of this series. And it has been a wild ride!

Last week we Brad taught through chapters 15 and 16—the seven bowls of judgement, which depict the final pouring out of God's wrath on an unbelieving world on judgement day. Where John goes next in this book is sort of a zoom-out, with a series of declarations—not quite in chronological order, about truth the church needs to know in order to live their lives faithfully, carrying out the mission God has for them, living lives of holiness and love, even in the face of opposition and persecution. We're going to look at the first of those declarations today in Chapters 17 and 18. "Babylon has fallen!"

As we get into this, I wanted to throw a perspective out to you that was fairly new to me in this study. I've said things like this before for years for other books of the Bible, but it didn't occur to me that the same kind of thing applies here.

Growing up in the church, I always assumed that John was sort of transcribing these weirdo visions that he was having as he was being dragged by the shirt-collar through the heavenly realms, seeing weird and wild stuff, and he was writing down as quickly and chaotically as he could the things he was seeing. And the reason I was having a hard time making sense of them was because, frankly, John was having a hard time making sense of them. Well, I was wrong. That's not how this is put together.

I said repeatedly during our study of Luke's Gospel account last year that it is very important to realize that when we are reading Luke, we aren't "hitting play" on a livestream recording of Jesus's life and ministry. We're not watching a video highlight reel. We're reading a very carefully constructed, carefully crafted, written account by Luke who was carefully choosing which details, and even the wording, and flow of the events he was writing. He wasn't inventing fiction, or anything like that, but he was carefully curating which true stories and quotes and accounts he was telling, in order to effectively communicate the aspects of Jesus's ministry that He was trying to highlight.

John is doing something very similar in Revelation. You'll notice that he starts the book speaking about something that happened to him in the past. "I was sitting on the Island of Patmos on the Lord's day, when I was given this vision from Jesus."

This is a little bit of speculation, but it makes good sense of the details. What happened was not that he haphazardly and quickly scribbled down as much as he could, but rather: He has the vision. He carefully ponders it. And considers how best to convey the vision that he saw, in order to most clearly and helpfully and impact-fully communicate it to his audience, doing justice to the magnificence of the vision that Jesus gave him.

So with that in mind. Let's read. This is a new section. John describes the destruction of the unbelieving world through the imagery of bowls being poured out in chapter 16, and then he backs up and focuses in on this character of a prostitute, prior to her destruction by the seven bowls, to tell the church something about what they're facing in their lives, what we're facing in our lives, and what her fate is.

## THE PROSTITUTE & THE BEAST

### Revelation 17:1-18 (CSB)

1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me: "Come, I will show you the judgment of the notorious prostitute who is seated on many waters. 2 The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her, and those who live on the earth became drunk on the wine of her sexual immorality." 3 Then he carried me away in the Spirit to a wilderness.

I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. 4 The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls. She had a golden cup in her hand filled with everything detestable and with the impurities of her prostitution. 5 On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: **Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth.** 6 Then I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. 7 Then the angel said to me, "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast, with the seven heads and the ten horns, that carries her. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go to destruction. Those who live on the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast that was, and is not, and is to come.

9 This calls for a mind that has wisdom. **"The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. They are also seven kings:** 10 Five have fallen, one is, the

other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while. 11 The beast that was and is not, is itself an eighth king, but it belongs to the seven and is going to destruction. 12 **The ten horns you saw are ten kings** who have not yet received a kingdom, but they will receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. 13 These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast. 14 These will make war against the Lamb, but **the Lamb will conquer them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings**. Those with him are called, chosen, and faithful."

15 He also said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute was seated, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. 16 The ten horns you saw, and the beast, will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, devour her flesh, and burn her up with fire. 17 For **God has put it into their hearts to carry out his plan** by having one purpose and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are fulfilled. 18 And the woman you saw is **the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth**."

### Who is the "notorious prostitute"?

City that has the royal power over the kings of the earth = she's the city on seven hills, this woman is Rome. But she wears the name Babylon, what's that about?

Well, Babylon is a pretty notorious figure in the scriptures. We first meet her in Genesis - the tower of Babel, for some reason it has been traditional, to use the word "Babel" when we translate the Hebrew into English in Genesis chapter 11. (The CSB straightens that out, which I appreciate.) Babylon is always a thorn in the side of God's people throughout the scriptures.

After generations of unfaithfulness to God's covenant, the people of Israel are exiled to Babylon. This is the setting in which the book of Daniel takes place. Babylon is a pagan world power that opposes God's people. And here, John is saying that Rome is yet another Babylon.

### Who is this beast?

Who is this seven-headed-ten-horned-red beast that the prostitute is riding on? Several weeks ago, I went over this passage in conjunction with chapter 13, noting the details John gives us about the identity of this beast. You'll notice in this passage it mentions that the beast represents past, present, and future (from John's 1<sup>st</sup>-century perspective) kings (political powers). You can review the sermon on our website if you want more detail, but the summary is:

**The beast is a composite image symbolizing Kings (political and military powers), past-present-and-future who oppose Jesus and God's people.** It is an image that includes a future, final king-beast, and also entails beast-kings throughout the ages.

And this is why every generation of Christianity has had some theory about a contemporary person who seemed to fit the bill, and they were right! That person probably was a small-b beast in some way! Some day there will be the "captial-B" Beast, the final one. But no one, not even the dragon, the devil, who gives these beasts their power, knows when that is. That's why this image can seem confusing.

Notice verse 17. All of these beasts, past, present, and future, are ultimately under God's control. Romans 8 tell us that God is about the business of making all things, including persecution, work together for the good of those who love God. What the beasts intend for evil, God intends for good, and the salvation of many. Martin Luther famously said "Even The devil is God's devil." The book of Job shows us that Satan is a dog on God's leash and cannot act without God's say-so.

In verse 18, we see that this prostitute thinks she has royal power over the kings of the earth. In verse 14 we get the truth: Jesus is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords!

Why God allows the devils leash to seem so long...? That is a sermon for another day, but one quick headline. The seeming problem of suffering in the world assumes that the worst thing that can happen is our physical discomfort, and that there is no bigger, eternal picture going on.

So as you ask that question, "How could a good and powerful God allow suffering in this life?" Don't let that question be rhetorical. God *is* good, and *is* powerful, and *does* care, and *can* (and so often *does*) powerfully deal with pain and suffering. And yet pain and suffering still occur in this world. And if you can ponder how those two things can be true at the same time, you might just start to gain wisdom, and peace, and comfort from God. Especially when you consider that He entered into this pain and suffering with us in Jesus.

## **THE JUDGEMENT: BABYLON HAS FALLEN**

John is writing an apocalypse. A Revelation. He is revealing things for what they are, and is revealing the final destiny of things. And so far in our passage he has revealed that this seemingly all-powerful, wealthy, glorious empire called Rome—the source of so much prosperity, technology, riches, wealth, health, peace—is actually a prostitute.

Remember the seven churches that John is writing to. Some of them are under persecution and stress, and need encouragement to hold on to the faith and persevere. But some of them have the reputation of being alive and prosperous and wealthy - but they have seriously compromised with the world. Some of them don't see past the glitz and glamour and luxuries the Roman Empire has to offer. Some of them have bought into the false, worldly teachings that are slowly drawing them away from holiness and obedience to God.

And John has a word for them. This seemingly desirable Rome. This Babylon. This prostitute is doomed. Using imagery and language from Isaiah, especially chapter 47, and other places in the prophets. John announces that God's judgement is coming to a climax.

### **Revelation 18:1-4 (CSB)**

1 After this I saw another angel with great authority coming down from heaven, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor.

2 He called out in a mighty voice:

**It has fallen, Babylon the Great has fallen!**

She has become a home for demons,  
a haunt for every unclean spirit,  
a haunt for every unclean bird,  
and a haunt for every unclean and despicable beast.

3 For all the nations have drunk the wine of her sexual immorality, which brings wrath.

The **kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her,**  
**and the merchants of the earth have grown wealthy from her sensuality and excess.**

4 Then I heard another voice from heaven:

**Come out of her, my people,**  
so that you will not share in her sins  
or receive any of her plagues.

A few points about Fallen Babylon. The way the wording and grammar works here, the angel is not declaring a future event "Babylon will fall!" He is declaring something that is currently true: "Babylon "the great"? It's fallen. She became a home for demons, a prison for unclean spirits, birds, and beasts..." And that is why she is doomed to judgement and destruction.

Just like the imagery of the prostitute, John, like the Old Testament prophets (especially Ezekiel) is using sexual immorality and prostitution as imagery for unfaithfulness to God, idolatry, and unholiness.

Kings, being intoxicated with the power they get to wield over others, and merchants, being intoxicated from the wealth they can gain by exploiting people, have abandoned God.

(And by the way, sexual immorality is literally included in the problem as well. The greek word for sexual immorality is *porneias* - where we get "pornography", a huge industry in our culture.)

And what is the first century church, and indeed we, God's people today, told? "Come out of her!" - Again, this is not a future warning to literally head for literal hills from a literal city lest we accidentally get caught in hail and fire of God's judgement.

This is a call to repentance, something like "orient yourself to all the offerings of the world so you do not share in its sins, and therefore suffer the plagues of the consequence of sin: judgement". And this is not a new message. John has already written to the church with this same message.

### **1 John 2:15-17 (CSB)**

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's possessions—is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 And the world with its lust is passing away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.

## **WHY JUDGEMENT HAS COME ON BABYLON**

### **Revelation 18:5-8 (CSB)**

5 For her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.  
6 Pay her back the way she also paid, and double it according to her works.  
In the cup in which she mixed, mix a double portion for her.  
7 As much as **she glorified herself and indulged her sensual and excessive ways**, give her that much torment and grief.

For she says in her heart, "I sit as a queen; I am not a widow, and I will never see grief."  
8 For this reason her plagues will come in just one day— death and grief and famine.  
She will be burned up with fire, because the Lord God who judges her is mighty.

It is not the wealth and prosperity and riches in and of themselves that were a problem, there is going to be wealth and prosperity in the new earth, for the rest of eternity! It was the arrogance and immorality and pride and godlessness that was the problem. And these things are the reason judgement has come.

# MOURNING BABYLON

For the rest of the chapter, we read that those who were in love with their comfort, wealth, and power, mourn at the judgement on Babylon. The wealthy and powerful, kings, will weep because they joined her and now realize judgement is coming.

## **Revelation 18:9-10 (CSB)**

9 The kings of the earth who have committed sexual immorality and shared her sensual and excessive ways will weep and mourn over her **when they see the smoke from her burning**. 10 They will stand far off in fear of her torment, saying, Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! **For in a single hour your judgment has come.**

The retailers—Merchants—will weep because they treasure *stuff*—and the wealthy they can gain.

## **Revelation 18:11-17 (CSB)**

11 The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, **because no one buys their cargo any longer**—12 cargo of gold, silver, jewels, and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet; all kinds of fragrant wood products; objects of ivory; objects of expensive wood, brass, iron, and marble; 13 cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, and frankincense; wine, olive oil, fine flour, and grain; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and **slaves—human lives**.<sup>1</sup> 14 The fruit you craved has left you. All your splendid and glamorous things are gone; they will never find them again.

15 The merchants of these things, who became rich from her, will stand far off in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning, 16 saying, Woe, woe, the great city, dressed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls; 17 **for in a single hour such fabulous wealth was destroyed!**

The supply chain operators—shipmasters and sailors— will weep because they got rich off the system, and their gravy train is now over.

## **Revelation 18:17-19 (CSB)**

And every shipmaster, seafarer, the sailors, and all who do business by sea, stood far off 18 as they watched the smoke from her burning and kept crying out, “Who was like the great city?” 19 They threw dust on their heads and kept crying out, weeping, and mourning, Woe, woe, the great city, **where all those who have ships on the sea became rich from her wealth; for in a single hour she was destroyed.**

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<sup>1</sup> Literally: “and bodies and souls of humans”

## WHY THE SAINTS REJOICE

But the saints, God's people, those who stand with the Lamb and follow Him wherever He goes, will rejoice on that day, because the injustice, persecution, and suffering at the hands of a godless world will finally be over, Jesus finally brings justice and gives evildoers what is coming to them.

### **Revelation 18:20-24 (CSB)**

**20 Rejoice over her, heaven, and you saints, apostles, and prophets, because God has pronounced on her the judgment she passed on you!**

21 Then a mighty angel picked up a stone like a large millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, In this way, Babylon the great city will be thrown down violently and never be found again. 22 The sound of harpists, musicians, flutists, and trumpeters will never be heard in you again; no craftsman of any trade will ever be found in you again; the sound of a mill will never be heard in you again; 23 the light of a lamp will never shine in you again; and the voice of a groom and bride will never be heard in you again. **All this will happen because your merchants were the nobility of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your sorcery. 24 In her was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all those slaughtered on the earth.**

## JOHN'S MESSAGE FOR US:

**17:14 - "Those with him are called, chosen, and faithful." - Don't be intimidated by threat of persecution.** We should not fear (or worship!) any King, any political leader, any military powers. Jesus is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

**18:2 - "Babylon is Fallen!" - Don't be fooled by appearances, this world with all its apparent prosperity, is doomed to destruction.** It has nothing to offer you that will last. Nothing to offer you that will fulfill. The reality behind the mask is that it is full of demons, unclean spirits, and detestable things.

**18:4 - "Come out of Babylon, my people" - Don't fall for the allure of the world, its wealth, its power, its toys, its pleasures.** God does give us good gifts for our enjoyment, but it is very possible to let those things become idols. Distracting us from mission. Distracting us from the good gifts of our Father which actually fulfill us.