

## **Series Revelation**

### **This Message #27 Revelation 17:1-18**

Last week we thought about the final sequence of judgments against the earth and its inhabitants. After the last bowl of God's wrath was poured out, there was the voice from the temple announcing the end. There came "flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake." "Every island fled away and the mountains could not be found." The "great city split into three parts, and the other cities of the nations collapsed."

That information is the launching point for our message today. Chapters 17 and 18 describe in detail the collapse of Babylon — what Babylon represented and why it had to be destroyed.

Let me give you a little perspective about the end of this book of Revelation. After today we will have five more chapters. These remaining chapters are focused on two important cities. The first is Babylon. It represents the evil world system — literally everything that our holy righteous God hates and is determined to eradicate. Babylon is the city of Satan. Babylon stands in sharp contrast to the city of God, the New Jerusalem, which will come down from heaven to earth so that God might dwell among His people for eternity.

Both cities will be inhabited by clearly differentiated communities of people. One city will be filled with people who are subject to judgment; the other will be blessed by God's presence. The qualities of the cities will be determined by the character of the people who will inhabit them. I remind you again of the overall theme of Revelation: "The Victory of Jesus and His Helpers Over Satan and His Helpers." These two groups of antagonists are identified with either the New Jerusalem or Babylon.

In chapters 17 and 18 we will think about the people of earth and the influence of Babylon on their lives. Then in chapters 19 through 22 we will think about the triumphant return of Jesus, the beginning of His victorious reign as King over all the earth, and the establishment of the new eternal order of heavens and earth.

**Read Revelation 17:1-18**

The judgment of Babylon was introduced to us in two previous passages. In chapter 14 John had seen an angel who announced: “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries” (*Revelation 14:8*). The angel wanted earthdwellers to know why they were about to be judged: it was because their system of thinking and acting had been infected by the spirit of Babylon, which prevented them from seeing the reality of the Creator God.

Then in the last part of chapter 16 we read about the climax of the outpouring of God’s anger. That’s where we read these words: “God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.”

From these two passages we can gain some inkling of what Babylon represents. Babylon has had an obviously evil influence on the human race. An understanding of this evil influence has been very important to believers through the centuries, and is for us today. That is why a lengthy detailed description is devoted to Babylon in this book.

In the passage for today we learn that John was invited to see “the punishment of the great prostitute.” In verse 5 this prostitute is identified as the city of Babylon, and in verse 18 she is referred to as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”

In the Old Testament, the metaphor of adultery was frequently applied to the nation of Israel. Yahweh referred to Israel as His wife, and He was disappointed about her spiritual unfaithfulness, evidenced by Israel’s turning to false gods. Yahweh often spoke about Israel through the prophets. His words were sometimes very blunt: “Long ago you broke off your yoke and tore off your bonds; you said ‘I will not serve you!’ Indeed, on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute ... You have forgotten me and trusted in false gods.” (*for complete text see Jeremiah 2:20-24; also Jeremiah 13:25b-27a.*)

The metaphor of harlotry was also used by the prophets to describe heathen nations. In these cases, the problem was not spiritual unfaithfulness since these nations did not have a relationship with Yahweh. Instead, harlotry described the willingness of these nations to do anything for the sake of material gain. Ethics, fairness, and morality were set aside in their efforts to gain economic advantage over others. Babylon was the great example in Scripture of both kinds of harlotry, religious defiance and economic greed.

The angel explained that the great prostitute is seated upon “many waters.” The meaning is explained to John in verse 15, “The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” This means that the great prostitute is positioned to influence all the people of the world. She uses the wine of her adulteries to seduce and entice the people of earth to share in her ungodly conduct. She has had and still has closest contact with the kings, the leaders of the people, but everyone is “intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.”

When John saw the woman, he took note of her striking appearance. Her attire radiated splendor, luxury, and beauty. She sat as a queen. Everything about her appearance was appealing. She held in her hand a golden cup. Outwardly, the expensive cup enhanced the appearance of the woman, but in the cup were all kinds of abominations and impurities. What a picture she presented: incredible beauty combined with, and contrasted with, gross wickedness. Her abominations were the kinds of behaviors which are unacceptable to God.

The woman had a mysterious title written on her forehead: “Babylon the Great, Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth.” The word “mystery” indicated that the title had a hidden meaning, which will become clear as we proceed.

John saw that “the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints — the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.” The repulsive and evil character of this woman was revealed by her behavior and reputation. The phrase, “drunk with blood,” was an ancient idiom describing “a lust for violence.” The woman was responsible for the deaths of God’s people, and, therefore, a suitable helper for Satan.

Notice in verse 3 that the woman was “sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.” This is the beast that was called up by the dragon/Satan to be a helper in his war against the Church. We learned about this beast in Revelation chapter 13. The prostitute and this beast, known as the Antichrist, were a team to seduce and deceive the people of earth and turn them from God.

We must not think of this great prostitute/city, identified as Babylon, as a specific historical city, whether past, present, or future. Rather, this prostitute/ city symbolizes all the cities of earth, all of the places where earthdwellers congregate together. She is the archetypal source of every idolatrous manifestation of rebellion against God. As the “mother of prostitutes” she has given birth to all sorts of evil abominations which have filled the earth — all the evil and wickedness which is behind resistance to God’s will on earth.

It is easy in Scripture to track the history of Babylon, and easy to recognize the negative influences of the city. The city was established by a descendent of one of the sons of Noah (*Genesis 10:10*). The inhabitants of that city attempted to construct the tower of Babel (*Genesis 11:1-9*). Behind their effort was deliberate disobedience to the instructions of God. Centuries later, Babylon, under the kingship of Nebuchadrezzar, was used by God to punish the nation of Judah. The pride, idolatry, and cruelty of the Babylonians became etched on the minds of the Jewish people and provided for them the symbolic significance of Babylon as the mother prostitute of evil and oppression. Babylon was the first of the world empires described in the Bible (*see Daniel chapters 2, 7, 8*). It was the empire which introduced the era of “the times of the Gentiles,” the era of Israel’s oppression which continues today.

We can look back at history and identify many many examples of cities and empires that have followed the behavior of the mother prostitute Babylon. In our lifetimes, we can think of Nazi Germany, the regime of Idi Amin in Ugandan, Soviet Russia under Stalin, China under Mao Tsedung, Pol Pot in Asia. I would also include British colonialism, and numerous aspects of American life. The spirit of Babylon lives on.

God was well aware of the powerful influence of Babylon. In predicting the downfall of Babylon, God said: “Babylon was a gold cup in the LORD’s hand; she made the whole earth drunk. The nations drank her wine; therefore they have now gone mad” (*Isaiah 51:7*). Those words had both an immediate and a long range application.

When John saw the woman, he marveled greatly. This does not mean that he admired the woman. Perhaps John was surprised and perplexed. He had been told that he would see the punishment of the great prostitute (*verse 1*), but in this first part of the vision there was no punishment.

The angel continues his explanation in verse 7. Notice that the explanation shifts from the great prostitute to the beast. An understanding of the woman is important to the followers of Jesus, but I think you will soon recognize that an understanding of the beast is much more basic and important.

The first detail to note is that there is a tight symbiotic relationship between the woman and the beast. The woman “rides” on the beast while the beast supports the woman and allows her to carry out her activities.

The next important detail about the beast might seem like a riddle or puzzle at first. “The beast once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction.” The explanation is not too complicated. We have previously identified this beast as the Antichrist, which means that he has duplicated certain aspects of the life and characteristics of Jesus. One of those ways involves presence on earth. Jesus was on earth, now He is not because He has ascended to heaven, and He will come back again to earth in the future. The Antichrist will duplicate this. He once was on the earth, now he is not because he is in the Abyss, and yet he will come back to earth again some day near the end of the age.

There is another explanation for this “puzzle.” After the dragon/Satan called the beast/Antichrist from the sea in chapter 13, we were informed that “one of the heads of the beast had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished at this and followed the beast” (*Revelation 13:3*). Now think about what happened to Jesus. He also suffered a fatal wound, the result of crucifixion, after which He was raised from the dead and appeared alive before His followers. The episodes of Jesus Christ and the Antichrist are similar, and the language describing them is similar.

There is some more information which seems at first perplexing, but which actually brings some clarity to the vision. We were previously told in chapter 13 that the beast had “seven heads and ten horns.” That information is repeated here in chapter 17 three more times. In verse 9 we are informed that the seven heads are “seven hills” and that they are also “seven kings.” Concerning the seven kings, we are informed in verse 10 that five of the heads/kings “have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come.”

*[Note: Among commentators there is a lot of disagreement about verses 9 and 10, and no end of innovative interpretations. Most commentators agree that the seven hills might be a reference to Rome, because Rome was known to be the city built on seven hills. However, there is very little agreement among commentators about the identification of Rome with Babylon and about the meaning of the kings. There is, for example, no logical sequence of seven Roman kings to fit the context.]*

The key to understanding this is the close association of “hills” and “kings.” The word translated “hills” can also be translated “mountains,” and in Scripture, mountains represent the power of kingdoms and their individual kings. *(See, for examples, Jeremiah 51:24-25, Daniel 2:35, 44-45.)* The heads which have fallen represent kings or kingdoms which were actively involved with Israel in the Old Testament. The first of these kingdoms was Egypt, from which God rescued His people, the Hebrews. The next kingdom was Assyria, which captured the northern ten tribes of Israel and carried the Israelites into captivity. Third was Babylon which captured Jerusalem and carried the Israelites of Judah into captivity. Fourth was the Medo-Persian empire which permitted some of the Israelites to return to their land but firmly ruled over them. The fifth empire was that of Greece. One segment of the Greek forces harassed, persecuted, and overwhelmed the Jews, and then Greece was replaced by the Romans. Thus, from the standpoint of John in the First Century, five of the kings and their kingdoms were long gone, and the sixth, Rome, was still around. The seventh kingdom had not yet come. It would be the one to emerge at the end of the age.

There is one more part to the puzzle. In verse 11 the angel announced that the one who once was, and now is not, will reappear as the eighth king. The angel also said that this eighth king belongs to the seven. We can solve this part of the puzzle also. This eighth king was originally one of the seven, but because he was dead and later had recovered from the fatal injury, he is counted twice. In his mortal stage he is the seventh head; but in his restored supernatural stage he is the eighth.

This individual is the Antichrist. In the last days all the world will marvel at him. “All inhabitants of the earth will worship this beast, at least, all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life” *(Revelation 13:8)*.

The seven heads of the beast are successive manifestations of the worldly kingdoms which have been at enmity with God through all of human history. The power and authority of the beast comes from Satan (*Revelation 13:2*). The beast is the worldly evil force behind human rebellious behavior. Throughout history there have been several notable leaders and kingdoms who have led in this rebellion. These are the separate heads of the beast. One more, final, manifestation of this beast will appear at the end of the age. That will be the Antichrist.

This final head/king, when he appears, will have the cooperation of ten human kings. Together they will make war against the Lamb, but, as verse 14 explains, the Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings.” We are informed two times, in verse 8 and 11, that the beast will “go to his destruction.”

Finally, in verse 15, the angel addresses the subject of the “punishment of the great prostitute,” which had been promised in verse 1. We have been told that the woman sits on the beast. In partnership with the beast she put forth her seductive influences on the succession of human empires, including the kingdoms of Egypt, Assyria, Medo-Persian, Babylon, Greece, and, in the First Century, Rome. She had an adulterous connection in every epoch of history with every existing world power. According to verse 15, her influence is universal.

But at the end of the age sometime unanticipated will happen. She will be destroyed. “The beast and the ten kings will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will tear her flesh and burn her with fire.” In the last days, the influence of the prostitute will no longer be welcomed.

Here’s why: Throughout history the evil influence of Babylon has primarily been of a religious nature. At the tower of Babel the people wanted to throw off the authority of God and to make a name for themselves — to do their own thing, so to speak. Under Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian empire was led by “magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers” (*Daniel 2:2*). Similar ungodly idolatrous religious practices have been the norm throughout the world.

According to the vision seen by John, “Babylon, the Mother of Prostitutes,” is the source of all the religious systems which have impacted humanity throughout history. Her mission is to suppress the truth about God. Her mission is not to keep people from religious activities and forms of worship, but to guide people down any religious pathway except that of the Lord God Almighty.

Through the centuries, the work of the great prostitute fit very neatly into the objectives of Satan. He is the ultimate perverter of truth. But there will be a change of strategy in the future. The Antichrist who supported the prostitute will want all human worship to be focused on himself. Back in chapter 13 we learned that all the inhabitants of earth will be forced to worship him. He will have an image set up in his honor. Everyone will be required to have his mark on the right hand or on the forehead in order to buy and sell. The final form of world religion will be an ecumenical, universal, atheistic, humanistic, satanic system which will deny everything related to the true God. Earthdwellers will be compelled to direct their devotion exclusively to the Antichrist, and by extension, to Satan.

The Apostle Paul described the Antichrist this way: “He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God” (*II Thessalonians 2:4*).

In view of the future consolidation of religious practices, the Antichrist will have no more need of the prostitute. The prostitute, with her emphasis on the diverse religious practices of people, will be perceived as a threat to Antichrist, a threat that he will eliminate. After his reappearance, the Antichrist will demand exclusive worship of himself.

Notice verse 17. God will put it into the hearts of the beast and the ten kings to carry out His purpose. It is remarkable how God can use the forces of evil to accomplish His purposes. God’s sovereign control of the affairs of history is a constant theme behind the events of the book of Revelation. Everything that occurs in this book is by His sovereign permission. God agreed “to give the beast and the ten kings their power to rule” but only “until His words would be fulfilled.”

We need to keep in mind that the Lamb will have the final victory. He will prove that He is Lord of lords and King of kings. In chapter 19 we read, "Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants" (*Revelation 19:1-2*).