Babylon and the Beast

Revelation 17

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 17:1-6 One of the angels of God’s wrath showed John a vision of the harlot Babylon, which represents godlessness and hedonism * Revelation 17:7-11 The angel reveals the meaning of the vision of the harlot Babylon and the beast she rides. * Revelation 17:12-18 The angel reveals the certainty of the ultimate destruction of Babylon—the godless culture that rejects the authority and God and the values of the people of God |
| **Summary Sentence** | God gives John a vision of a drunken harlot Babylon, which represents the nature of the godless cultures that will oppose the people of faith until the end of the age. |
| **Central Idea** | The city of Satan will be destroyed; the city of God will last foreverl |

In our study of the book of Revelation this year, we’ve seen an assortment of images that describe what we may expect life to be like in a world that is still fallen—in a world that is still not the way it’s supposed to be. We’ve seen figurative visions that portray the difficulties we face as *people* of God in a world that is *hostile* to God. In the book of Revelation we’ve seen dramatic figurative descriptions that reveal to us what life is to be like between the time of Christ’s death and resurrection and the future day of Christ’s return.

Let’s take just a moment to quickly review about what the Bible teaches about our past, our present, and our future.

The Bible teaches that everything that is wrong in our lives—every illness that we face, every unkindness we suffer, every loss we must endure—all of these bad things have their origin in the fall of man.

At the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 3, the first created man, Adam and his wife chose to disobey God, and that first act of disobedience changed everything on earth.

In Genesis chapter 3, right after the fall of man, God spoke to Adam and his wife, and God told Adam that because of Adam’s disobedience, from that day on, the world would be different. Because of Adam’s sin, the world would be corrupted by sin. Every human being born since that day would be sinful by nature, and for every human being, our earthly destiny is decay and death.

Because of Adam’s Fall, our world is not the way it’s supposed to be. Our world operates under the curse of sin. Mankind is by nature enslaved to sin.

But in that same chapter of the Bible, Genesis chapter 3, God began to progressively reveal God’s promise that one day He would send a Deliverer who would liberate God’s people from their slavery to sin. God would send a Savior who would bring forgiveness to God’s people—a Savior who would give God’s people a new heart, a new nature, a new capacity to know God and to obey God.

Throughout the Old Testament, God progressively revealed more information about this promised Savior. The Old Testament reveals that

1. This Savior will be a warrior who will defeat God enemies
2. He will be a merciful and compassionate Shepherd who will lead God’s people
3. He will judge and remove evil from this world
4. He will establish an eternal Kingdom of perfect righteousness
5. He will be the eternal King over that future Kingdom
6. He will be the Son of God.

The Bible reveals in the New Testament that back in the first century, this promised Savior appeared on the scene. Jesus was born. Jesus lived His life in perfect obedience to God. When Jesus was put to death at the cross, His death paid the penalty for our sin. Because of Christ’s death on the cross, those who come to faith in Jesus are delivered from their slavery to sin. Because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead, we know that He will return to raise the dead, to judge the wicked, and to establish His eternal Kingdom.

Back in the first century, the promised Warrior and Savior and King arrived. He died for our sins; He was resurrected from the dead. He ascended to the right hand of God to reign from heaven over God’s creation.

But the promised Kingdom has not yet come. Evil has not yet been destroyed. Death and decay still prevail on this fallen world. Since the first century, God’s people have waited in eager expectation for the return of Jesus and the ultimate destruction of evil. Since the first century, God’s people have been frustrated and disappointed and fearful because of the ongoing presence of evil in the world.

Why has Jesus not yet returned? Why does this world continue in the corruption of sin? Why is evil so prevalent in this world when we know that God’s Son has already broken the power of Satan?

The book of Revelation has been given to the people of faith to comfort them and to assure them that God’s plan for His Kingdom is still intact. God is in the process of establishing His Kingdom. God is the process of making all things new. It’s true that the world is not the way it’s supposed to be, but God will indeed bring His Kingdom at the appointed time.

Keep in mind as you read this book that the purpose of the book is to comfort the church in its struggle against the forces of evil. It’s not a book of horror; it’s a book of comfort. It’s not a book that is intended to scare you; it’s a book that is intended to reassure you that God is sovereign; God is always in control. God’s Kingdom will come.

The theme of book is the victory of Christ and His church over Satan and Satan’s helpers. The theme of the book is the victory of God’s people over their enemies. It’s about the certainty of the coming of God’s eternal Kingdom of righteousness. **One day the kingdom of Satan will be destroyed, and the Kingdom of God will prevail**.

In our study of Revelation thus far, there have been five enemies of God revealed—five enemies of God who stand as antagonists against God and the people of faith. In these final chapters of Revelation, we’re going to see how God is going to defeat all of these enemies.

Here are the enemies we’ve seen:

* the red dragon (Satan) He is a spiritual being, not a material being, but he has the ability to influence the values and the decisions of those who reject the authority of God
* beast from the sea (this represents godless governments throughout history, but will culminate in a final ruler—the man of lawlessness—who will wage war against God’s people).
* beast from the land (represents false religions and godless philosophies, but will culminate in a false prophet who will deceive the nations)
* Babylon (represents the seductive allure of hedonism, materialism, prosperity)
* the foot soldiers—men throughout history who carry the mark of the beast—men who serve Satan and Satan’s allies.

Now, in the final chapters of Revelation, we’re going to see in figurative images, what is going to be the final end of each of these enemies of God.

In chapter 17 we see the nature and the history of the seductive power of Babylon

In chapter 18 we’ll see the ultimate fall of Babylon

In chapter 19 we’re going to see the long-expected return of Christ and His victory over the beast and the false prophet, and all who oppose the reign of Christ

In chapter 20 we will see an instant replay—a summary of how God has provided for His people during the church age, and we will see the doom of Satan and the final judgment of the dead.

In chapters 21-22 we will see a glorious description of the new heaven and new earth and the coming of the fullness of the Kingdom of God. **One day, the city of Satan will be destroyed, and the city of God will prevail**.

What a blessing and a comfort it is to study this book.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 17.

Look at verses 1-2. *“Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth* (earth dwellers) *were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’”*

What does this harlot in verse 1 represent? In this vision, the term *adultery* refers to *faithlessness toward God*. It refers to spiritual faithlessness. It refers to spiritual idolatry. This harlot represents the seductive allure of hedonism, materialism, glamour, celebrity, and prosperity. These are the things that men and women pursue rather than pursue a life that is pleasing to God. Throughout history this harlot has been a seductive force that has drawn men and women to reject the authority of God.

Look at verses 3-6. *“And the angel 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 the beast 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.”*

In verse 5, this harlot is called Babylon the Great, but in verse 18 she is called *“the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”*

In the book of Revelation, the world is characterized as comprising two communities—two cities: the city of God and the city of Satan. And what we see in the book of Revelation is that **one day, the city of Satan will be destroyed, and the city of God will last forever**.

Back in Revelation 3:12, Jesus said, *“I will make him who overcomes a pillar in the temple of my God. … I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the* ***city*** *of my God, the* ***new Jerusalem****, which is coming down out of heaven…”*

The city of God is the New Jerusalem. The community of God—the people of faith—will live in the city of God forever. **One day, the city of Satan will be destroyed, and the city of God will last forever**.

In the book of Revelation, the term *“the great city”* always refers to the city of Satan. Remember back in Revelation 11, when John described the death of God’s witnesses. Revelation 11:8 says this, *“and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, and where their Lord was crucified.”* In this one verse, in Revelation 11:8 *“the great city”* is called three different things. It’s called Sodom and Egypt and faithless Jerusalem.

In our passage today, in Revelation 17, *“the great city”* is called Babylon, and also Rome.

This one city, *“the great city”* is a trans-historical reality. It represents all of the cities—all of the cultures—that are opposed to God and His people. *“The great city”* is Sodom and Gomorrah and Egypt and Nineveh and Tyre and Rome. It’s Ephesus; it’s Corinth; it’s Hollywood; it’s New York City; it’s Beijing. It is *“the great city.”* It represents the city of Satan. It is the paradigm—the archetype—of every godless culture in history. But we’re going to see in the book of Revelation that **one day, the city of Satan will be destroyed, but the city of God will last forever**.

The woman riding the beast is a harlot; she offers pleasure to those who will be with her. She represents all of the pleasures—all of the pursuits—that seduce people away from the worship of God. She seems at first glamorous and beautifully adorned, but she’s been defiled by evil, and she has treated the people of God with murderous cruelty. She is drunk with the blood of the saints. She is the city of Satan.

The harlot is sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. She may seem desirable, but to approach her and embrace her is to come under the influence of the beast.

Look at verses 7-8. *“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 Abyss and go to destruction. And the earth-dwellers, 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.”*

The beast represents Satan’s power. There was a time when Satan had unchallenged power over the fallen earth. In Luke chapter 4, when Satan came to our Lord in the wilderness in order to tempt Him, the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and the devil said to Jesus, *“I will give you all the authority and splendor of the kingdoms of the world, for it has been given to me.”* There was a time when God permitted the kingdoms of this world to be under the power of Satan. But the extent of Satan’s power was only temporary.

Jesus defeated Satan at the cross, and so now, although the beast once *“was”*, now we say that the beast *“is not.”* In Hebrews 2:14, the Bible says that Jesus *“shared in our humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.”* The beast—the unrestrained power of Satan—was, but now is not. That the beast *“is not”* refers to Satan’s defeat by the Lamb on Calvary. To those who follow the Lamb, the beast has no power over them.

And yet, verse 8 of our passage says that the beast *“is to come.”* The beast will rise from the Abyss in that future day, and the earth-dwellers—the godless ones—will marvel at the beast and be seduced by his power.

The beast was, and is not, and is to come. The beast will rise from the Abyss, but in so doing he will go to his destruction. **One day, the city of Satan will be destroyed, and the city of God will last forever**.

Now look at verses 9-11. *“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.”*

The heads of the beast are mountains; the heads of the beast are kings; there seven kings, but five have been destroyed, but then there’s an eighth king to come; it’s all very confusing. No wonder that the beginning sentence says that this *“this calls for a mind with wisdom.”*

Here’s my thinking on this. The term *mountains* and also the term *kings* represent world kingdoms or powerful empires. The beast represents Satan’s power and influence as they shape godless world governments. The number seven represents completeness, and so I believe that the seven heads, the seven mountains, the sevens king all represent Satan’s powerful influence over the complete history of fallen humanity.

And yet, we know that Satan’s power was dramatically curtailed by Christ’s victory at the cross. So I believe that in our passage, those empires prior to the coming of Christ are represented by the five kings who have fallen. Five of the seven heads of the beast have already been slain by the power of the blood of the Lamb.

Nevertheless, even after the resurrection of Christ, we find that typically, the kingdoms and governments of this earth stand opposed to the gospel. These current enemies of God’s people are represented in this vision as the *“king”* who is. Satan’s power has been restrained since the cross, but the world is still fallen, and the governments of this world still do not subject themselves to the authority of God and of His Christ.

Five kings have fallen; one king is now, but there is another king who has not yet come. We will learn more about this king in future chapters, but we can rest assured that this future Satanic king will receive power only for a little while. And we know that **one day, the kingdom of Satan will be destroyed, and the Kingdom of God will last forever**.

Now look at verses 12-14. *“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 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.”*

The reference to ten kings probably doesn’t mean exactly ten. It probably represents a multiplicity of kings, but an unspecified number. The people of that day, especially the Hebrews, were not as enamored of precise numbers as we are today.

This passage reveals that the final assault on God and His people will not be an assault from a single nation; it will represent a gathering of nations to oppose the authority of God. This gathering of nations will display its power for one hour—which means a short, undefined period of time. This gathering of nations will make war on the people of faith, but Jesus will utterly defeat them. Jesus will be the victor, for Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings. We, His people—we Christians—will share in His victory. **One day, the kingdom of Satan will be destroyed, and the Kingdom of God will last forever**.

Look at verses 15-18. *“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 God’s 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."”*

The simpleton might look at the harlot and believe that all of the fun, all of the revelry, all of her prosperity will be the reward of embracing the harlot and accepting the authority of the beast. And yet, the reality is the opposite. In the end, the beast isn’t a provider of abundance, he is a destroyer of abundance. The beast doesn’t offer material prosperity; the beast actually offers only spiritual poverty. The harlot may appear to be happy and carefree, but actually the beast will turn on her, and the end result will be her destruction.

Next week we will see more about the fall of Babylon; we will read more about the destruction of the city of Satan.

But it should be apparent from what we’ve seen thus far that the pleasures of sin are empty. The rewards of following the world’s values are fleeting. The lifestyles of the rich and famous are lifestyles of emptiness. The beauty of the harlot is an illusion.

God has made us for Himself, and our restless hearts will find no rest until they find their rest in Him.

Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be, but God is making all things new. God will bring about His good purpose. One day evil will be judged and God’s eternal Kingdom will come. **One day, the kingdom of Satan will be destroyed, and the Kingdom of God will last forever**.