

CHAPTER 17

INTRODUCTION:

As our study of chapter 16 ended, the seventh bowl of wrath was being poured out. Even though the events of chapters 17-18 take place afterwards, I believe they are best viewed as a continuation of God's wrath loosed with that final bowl.

Jesus, the Dragon, and the two beasts: these four figures are at the center of the entire second half of the book of Revelation, and certainly our chapter today. They represent the complete spectrum of influence that continues to exist over the human population.

Jesus, of course, is the male child the woman gave birth to in chapter 12. His influence is nothing less than uprightness, goodness, and excellence. All those who truly believe He is the Son of God and follow him are the righteous. They are the 144,000 not overcome by the influence of the world. Their names are written in the Lamb's book of life and they are members of His kingdom on earth – the church that He established.

The Dragon, hovering over the woman in chapter 12 as he prepares to devour her offspring, stands directly opposite to Jesus and is, of course, Satan. He is unholy, corrupt and vile. He represents all evil. He and his followers are the unrighteous. Because their names are not found written in the Lamb's book of life, they will suffer the second death described in chapter 20 unless they repent and turn to God.

The two beasts were introduced in chapter 13. The first represents outside pressures – the enticement of power, riches or fleeting pleasures used to convince people to follow the dragon. Everyone is subject to this allure. We are bombarded with messages urging us to “do what feels good.” and “look out for number one.” The mentality “Live for the moment” feeds the minds and hearts of the worldly. This beast is characterized as the idolatrous, wicked city of Babylon.

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The second beast's influence comes from within us and is represented by the harlot. It is self-deception: *"the process of denying or rationalizing away the relevance, significance, or importance of opposing evidence and logical argument."* In other words, the willingness to believe lies and invalidated promises made by false teachers serving the dragon – many of whom make their claims "in the name of God." This second beast is possibly even more dangerous than the first because his work is more subtle. He preys on the inclination of those who wish to mold God's word to suit themselves: "I know the Bible says..., but..." is their rationalization; and they deceive themselves into believing God didn't really mean those things which make them uncomfortable.

Babylon and the harlot – two symbols for the beasts. These are the evil ones who wish to keep us from serving God, one presenting us with allures from without, the other attacking us from within. It seems obvious to me that one of the reasons we were given the book of Revelation is to show us the importance of dealing with these threats so we can avoid their certain fate – the second death.

This second death will all be outlined in detail in chapters 17-18. Chapters 19 and 20 will deal with the overthrow and destruction of the Dragon himself, and finally, the book will end with a description of the victory for all the followers of Jesus.

Read the text, let the scene form, then prepare to discuss.

The Great Prostitute and the Beast

"And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, 'Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.' So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten

horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration. And the angel said unto me, 'Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns. The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is. And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space. And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition. And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast. These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast. These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.' And he saith unto me, 'The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues. And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree, and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.'"

Up until now we have been dividing the people on earth into two broad categories: righteous and unrighteous. That remains true, but a sub-category exists under the unrighteous label, consisting of those who profess to be faithful members of the Church, but are not. They

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are still living under the influence of the two beasts even though they may “play church” every week. The sad thing is that many of these are what we would call “good people.” But, our names are either written in the Book of Life or they are not. There is no evidence of a milder punishment for this category of individuals. All whose names are not found written in the Book of Life will be cast into the eternal lake of fire. With this in mind, let’s delve into the chapter.

John begins this segment by telling us that one of the seven angels who had poured out a bowl of wrath spoke with him, saying, ***“Come hither; I will show unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters...”*** Some might be startled by the word choice here: ***“the great whore”***. This is strong language necessary to describe something despicable to God: Christians committing spiritual adultery. Our promise to remain faithful to Jesus when we obey the gospel is similar to the solemn vow made when a man and a woman enter into marriage. So valued is this wedded union that He uses it as an example to show the relationship of Christ to the church and of Christians to their King. So... when we forsake the church, we are forsaking Christ, thereby committing spiritual adultery. Further along in the chapter, verse 15 will explain the “many waters” mentioned here: ***“And he saith unto me, ‘The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues.’”***

In Revelation 21:9, another of the seven angels will say to John, ***“Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife,”*** and he will be shown the “New Jerusalem” – the ultimate resting place for the faithful. Let’s take a moment to look at two important pairs of words here in the latter part of Revelation: ***“the harlot and the beast”*** and ***“the bride and the lamb.”*** These two sets of words give us a comparison between true worshippers who comprise the Church (the kingdom that Jesus established), and those members who are deemed by Christ as not true worshippers, even though they maintain that they are. We must all remember that every single thing we do... every single thought we have, is known by God. We may be able to fool even the people closest to us, but we cannot fool God. Those who profess to be Christians (even though they participate in worship services) without the right attitude, heart and faith, are guilty of adultery with the harlot. Unless they repent they will suffer the same punishment as the unrighteousness.

Continuing with the reading, the angel tells John that the harlot is one, ***“With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.”*** No matter how strong we think we are, we must always be on guard because those two beasts are coming at us each and every day, just like they did in verse 2 for ***“the kings and inhabitants of the earth.”*** The phrase ***“of the earth”*** simply refers to the worldly as opposed to the righteous. It also appears that the two distinct classes spoken of here – the “kings” and “inhabitants” – refer to the universality of faithlessness. It is not confined to any one class of society. Everyone is potentially susceptible.

The angel then carries John away into the wilderness to see the justice that is to be done to the harlot. Remember the last time the “wilderness” was mentioned? In chapter 12 when the woman gave birth to her newborn child, she then escaped into the wilderness. This mother symbolized the remnant of the faithful, those who would later become the church. So, is the harlot in the wilderness too, dwelling among these faithful? Where else would she go if her aim is to influence them, and ultimately to lure them away? The mother was taken into the wilderness for her protection. We, the modern-day church, have that same protection available to us. I refer you to Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus:

“Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints ...”

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Particularly, I want you to notice the part that says, ***“above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.”*** We have no reason to fear anything that the Dragon may use against us. If our faith is strong enough, we will be able to resist it.

According to verse 3 the harlot is sitting upon: ***“a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.”*** Have we seen such a creature before? Yes, in chapter 13:1. It is the first beast that rose out of the water. The scarlet color is symbolic of worldly preeminence or power. Her sitting upon this beast does not indicate she had control over it, instead that she relied on it – needed it – for support. She derived power from this beast.

Notice the description of her clothing. John says she was ***“arrayed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, holding a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.”*** She must have looked quite beautiful, and no doubt was enticing. Much like the pleasures of worldliness, she would have been hard to resist. But, look what she really offers: “filthiness” and “abominations” – things that were displeasing to God.

It was customary in Bible times for a harlot to wear specific clothing or jewelry meant to identify her for what she was. Some were actually “marked” like with a tattoo. This one has written on her forehead: ***“Mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth.”*** Her beauty is obvious but it belies her intentions. By depicting this woman as Babylon, the mother of harlotry and abomination to God (when previously he referred to one of the beasts as Babylon) I believe John is trying to tie the harlot and the two beasts together for us. They are all working as one with a very singular purpose.

In order to better understand what is being said here, let me reference an example found in Jeremiah 2. Jeremiah primarily prophesied to Judah during the Babylonian captivity and his primary concern was false and insincere worship, along with a failure to trust Jehovah. In

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chapter 2 he speaks of a woman in the wilderness clothed in crimson and golden ornaments (whom he called a harlot) with a sign on her forehead that caused transgression in the rest of the people dwelling in the wilderness. Jeremiah says the harlot represents that part of Judah that was unfaithful and insincere, whereas the other people in the wilderness represented the opposite, those genuinely trying to worship God earnestly. But in the harlot's skirts was found the blood of the souls of the poor innocent ones. The significance: Judah was God's people, yet a harlot was among them – someone professing to be “married to God” yet committing spiritual adultery with the world.

In that same fashion, here in Revelation 17 the harlot represents the worldly portion of the church. As much as we hate the thought, we know there are those who profess to be children of God when they are actually quite firmly planted “in the world.” These people can oftentimes do more damage from inside the church than the spiritually disinterested can from afar. And just as Jeremiah declared that Judah was guilty of the blood of the innocent poor, here we are told that the harlot – that unfaithful portion of the church – is guilty of the blood of the saints!

Upon seeing the woman (the harlot) John says that he “*wondered with great admiration.*” A better translation says he “*marveled with great amazement!*” Why would John be amazed? My thought is he was astonished that Christians would be drawn in by her... or that she would be so bold as to attempt to entice these people “on the inside.” But the lure of sin is strong for the weak of faith. Interestingly, the angel asks John the same question – “*Why did you marvel?*” But without waiting for an answer, he says “*I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns.*”

NOTE:

Chapter 17, beginning in verse 8 and going through the first part of chapter 19, is arguably the most difficult part of Revelation to understand. Before we delve into it, let's remember the rules of engagement, so to speak. The same symbols we have been

working with previously are still in play here. **We MUST be consistent!** To shift between literal and symbolic will only confuse us and distort the message.

Verse 8 reads:

“The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.”

So which beast are we talking about here? It is the first one from chapter 13 with the seven heads and ten horns. We also learn here that he is scarlet, a color that symbolizes worldliness. Remember, the Dragon is of the same color. What caused the world to marvel and follow after the beast on their quest to worship the dragon? It is true, He did have 7 heads, 10 horns, the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion – but it was none of those things. It was the “wounded head” that was now healed. That is what inspired their following. Why? Because the people were awestruck that he had faced off against the enemy and survived to fight another day. “*Who can stand against him!*” was their cry. And what was the cause of his wound? **The resurrection of Jesus Christ!** You see, Jesus’ death had been a huge win for His enemies, but much more than that, His resurrection and return to the right hand of God struck a tremendous blow to Satan and his followers.

So let’s make the proper application of this symbolic language: *“The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit...”* The “was,” the “is not,” and the “shall ascend” are talking about three different periods of time. Let’s look at each:

The “was” represents that period in history before the sacrifice of Jesus. It is well represented by the condition of things in the time of Noah when it was said that the entire world “thought of evil continually.” Of course immediately after the flood there was no evil, but it didn’t take long.

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Remember the Tower of Babel was built in Babylon, a city given over to idol worship. Abraham's father, Terah, was deep into idol worship before that family left for Haran, and there are many examples of the evil that "was."

The "*is not*" represents the period since the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus overcame the world and the lure of evil "*is not*" threatening to Christians because we know what awaits us. The true believer can shrug off the Dragon's promises because he knows that this Dragon "*is not*" in control. He still exists, but he is in the abyss, the dwelling place of the devil, with no power at all over the faithful if we arm ourselves against him. This time period includes our own – the twenty-first century and beyond, if the world lasts that long.

The "*shall ascend*" represents that period which is yet to come. It is that end of time judgment that will send the Dragon and all his followers out of the abyss into the lake of fire, while the faithful believers are taken to Heaven.

Then, beginning in verse 9 we see a lot of added symbolism for "*the mind which hath wisdom.*" The actual English equivalent would be "*here is the meaning which requires wisdom.*" This is our reminder to be consistent in our interpretations.

"The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth."

One of the reasons this passage is often debated is because commentators lack consistency in their interpretation of symbols and numbers. These things can't be viewed as figurative in one case and as literal in another. For example, because Rome is often referred to as the "seven hilled city" many say this verse represents Rome. That way of thinking will leave us scratching our heads, though, when we get to the seven kings, the ten kings and the one hour mentioned in verse 12.

Therefore, we must remember this: The seven churches of Asia were not literal, the seven seals were not literal, the seven trumpets were not literal, the lamb was not literal, the sword from the mouth of Jesus was not literal, the beasts are not literal, and here in this chapter, the seven mountains and seven heads are not literal.

We know the number 7 represents “perfect-ness in the sense of completeness” and completeness can also be viewed as being “universal,” something that encompasses all. We also know that “mountain” is a reference to power or government. So, the “*seven heads and seven mountains*” of verse 9 are best understood as “*universal governmental power.*” Yes, in John’s time, Rome was this “universal power,” and certainly is a partial fulfillment of this vision, but some want to suggest that Rome is the single intended interpretation, which it is not. (More about this later...)

“And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space.” Notice the phrase beginning with, “*And there are seven kings...*” The second word is translated “**there**” by the KJV, but the American Standard, Revised, and International Standard Versions render it “**And THEY are...**” which makes a world of difference in its meaning. Reading from any of those versions, the complete sentence would be, “*The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings: five are fallen, one is, and the other is not yet come;*” which tells us Seven Heads = Seven Mountains = Seven Kings... all the same thing. Hence, we have the idea of a succession of leaders during the time of this “universal world power” addressed by verse 9. I suggest that it references corrupt governments in general, not only Rome.

In the remainder of chapter 17, the angel explains to John the overall meaning of this section and how all of these things fit together. He begins by dividing the “*whole universality of world kingdoms*” into three distinct, but different groups. As verse 10 tells us, the first group consists of the five earlier kings already fallen by the time John receives this message. The second group consists of the present ones currently in power at the time John is receiving this

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message, whereas the third consists of only one king and he is still in the future. Again – all of this is representative of that which entices one to stumble. Governments come and go, and we cannot rely on our rulers to determine right from wrong. The powers of the world (the kings, here) neither condemn nor react to the influences of the prostitute. It is none of their concern. In fact, by refusing to take a stand against her, it is as though they are condoning her activities. Do we not see that same behavior in our own modern governments?

The American Standard Version of verse 11 reads: ***“And the beast that was, and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is of the seven; and he goeth into perdition.”*** Rather than cause more confusion, this verse actually sums up what has been said already. I use the ASV for this verse instead of the KJV because it is more accurately rendered. Rather than ***“he is the eighth”*** (KJV) you will notice it is expressed as ***“he is also an eighth.”*** This wording rules out the idea that the beast is the eighth in a succession of kings or worldly powers and is, in reality, a part of the seven. You may be wondering how this clears anything up. It is really pretty simple: The beast himself has worked through these seven kings! We already know that this beast is the first officer in the Dragon’s army of worldly soldiers. His final doom is re-asserted in the statement, ***“goeth into perdition!”*** His destiny is the lake of fire!

“And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast.” We are not adding another 10 kings here. “Horns” is a representation of power, as is the number “10.” With both symbols used together, it increases the meaning of “receiving power” from just an ordinary amount of power to “sufficient power” to accomplish his goals. The idea is that this beast, like the dragon, has the full knowledge and complete power of the world behind him as he faces off against the church and Christianity. This term “one hour” is the same as saying “a short time.”

John is told the ten kings ***“have received no kingdom as yet...”*** Again, we’re not talking about another 10 kings, but rather the idea of a king with widespread and sufficient power to continue the fight against Christianity! No specifics are mentioned, so we don’t know who these powerful men are, only that the battle continues. Looking back at history from our 21st century

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perspective, we can see the effects of that power. The hostility toward Christians is no longer just contained in a government that refuses to make decisions about morality; (perhaps hiding behind “separation of church and state”) it now comes from all corners of society. For example, our government does not dictate what must be worn in public but allows society to determine what is acceptable to them and then makes laws amenable to that society! Therefore, it is now considered “ok” to dress immodestly, to flaunt your body in public. This reality is greatly magnified and even glorified in all the media that daily bombards us. Make no mistake: the devil is at work here, seeking to lull us into thinking all of this is acceptable. Such a danger!

“These have one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast.” All these “kings” (this power) plot to make war with the Lamb (Jesus). This war is the battle that extends throughout the history of the world, the forces of evil squaring off against true believers. It is the one in which we are presently engaged, and for which we are suited up with the full armor of God. It is Armageddon and in the end...we win. ***17:14 These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.***

What becomes of the harlot? ***“And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.*** The harlot is representative of the apostate church, as we recall. The very world which she trusted shall turn against her and hate her and destroy her. Remember...the dragon’s words are empty and hollow. He promises everything when he truly has nothing to offer. It’s a fitting end to those who live by the promises of the world and do not trust in the power of Jesus Christ! Why did they do this? Verse 17 tells us ***“God has put it in their hearts to fulfill His will!”*** I don’t fully understand how or why God does that except to say throughout the scriptures it is revealed that God used men, women, and nations, to carry out His purpose. Here, God causes the powers (the 10 kings) to agree on destroying the harlot because that was God’s purpose... and when God purposes to do something, it gets done!

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Finally, in verse 18, the woman introduced in verse 5 is identified as that “great city” (Babylon). In determining just which city this “great city” is, we must look back to Chapter 16 where it says *“the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell: and great Babylon came in remembrance before God, to give unto her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of his wrath.”*

Some commentators declare that Rome is the great city being talked about! But, think about our Old Testament history. Babylon was the oppressor of God’s people. That was literal. They did physically take Judah into captivity. It is only logical to attach the name Babylon to symbolically represent those in New Testament times and beyond, that persecute the church and attempt to take God’s people captive. Certainly, Rome played her part in the persecution of the church, but to declare that Rome is the *total* fulfillment of this prophecy relegates the entire book of Revelation to a history lesson, therefore suggesting it is of no importance to us except in that capacity.

God has made a promise about Babylon “that great corrupt city” in regard to her future. Look at Isaiah 13:19-22.

“And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees’ excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. 20 It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged.”

Judgment... It is coming!