

All Things New: Babylon the Harlot Part I
By Jason Huff
May 10, 2020
Isaiah 1:18-26; Mark 10:17-27; Revelation 17

Today's final Scripture reading is Revelation 17. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "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 harlot, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead, a mystery: "Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth." I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come. This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction. The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings -- and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the harlot. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.""

- What gets your attention? Shiny things? Expensive things? Shocking things? Unjust things? What is repulsive to one fascinates another
 - Remake of Dirty Rotten Scoundrels – almost identical except the lead con artists were now women, and there were more rude jokes
 - We have a generation of “influencers” that are supposed to tell us what things are important – find them on YouTube
 - Our sense of injustice was triggered this week by the story of a young black man murdered in the street down in Georgia, and it took the police three months to arrest the men who committed the crime – only after a video of the incident spurred outrage
- In last week’s discussion of Revelation 16, we saw how none of the punishments that God sends against humanity actually turn them towards Him – despite their misery, they continue to follow the beast rather than to worship the living God – it’s difficult to get our attention on what really matters
- This week’s passage brings us shocking imagery and confusing concepts – lots of disagreement, and I can’t promise I’m right
- We might be shocked that the Bible’s symbolism uses prostitution to describe evil in the world. But something I want us to understand right from the get-go is that God knows His creation perfectly and intimately – and God uses language that speaks to us in earthy ways
- Many churches use the King James Version because of the beautiful, poetic language – even though that language is archaic to us, we sometimes think the “thee”s and “thou”s, that very high language to us, is biblical – but it’s not in the original languages
- Our translation that we use in our worship is not precisely literal, but as close as you can get in English while making the meaning clear
- Translations often make things more palatable to us – what’s rude in one language might not be in another
- Through many books in the Bible, the evil of idolatry and the evil of prostitution are connected – Israel sells herself to whatever gods she thinks will protect her or bring her good relationships with her neighbors
- An entire book is the story of the prophet Hosea, who is told by God to find an unfaithful wife and then to seek after her when she strays, and it’s an analogy of God loving and seeking after unfaithful Israel
- God has His prophets and preachers use some shocking metaphors to get our attention

- But the key question is, what does Babylon the Great really stand for?
 - Early in the passage, it says that “she sits on many waters,” which are later explained to be peoples, multitudes, nations and languages – both the kings and the inhabitants of the earth are taken with her – this is not a person, nor is it something affecting only a region – Babylon the Great is an enticement to everyone around the globe – the last phrase in the passage says she is the great city that rules over all the kings – this is not some sort of one-world government, but that her lures, her sins, are present throughout the world and are at times far more powerful than governments and rulers
 - In our Scripture version today, I used the word “harlot” because in English, it conjures up different imagery – Babylon is not exclusively about sexual sin, but about broken loyalty and unfaithfulness to God, who as our creator has exclusive rights to telling us why we were made and what we should do
 - The harlot is different from the beast
 - Beast is primarily about power, violence, and oppression of those who would oppose it – conquering by force
 - The harlot uses the beast and rides upon it – the harlot uses power and violence at times, but Babylon the Harlot is more about the seductiveness of the world – capturing hearts and minds not with brute force but with promises of pleasure and treasure
 - The beast is an uncomfortable ally with the harlot that will eventually ruin her – the beast hates sharing power and being second fiddle to anyone or anything – and this makes sense – think about our modern world’s wars – those countries where you can’t lure a majority to your ideology, you go on the ground with guns – fascism, communism, even capitalism have followed this pattern
 - And think about the regimes that hate the Western world the most – Iran, North Korea – what is it they consistently hate about the West? Not our technology, but our decadence
 - Decadence might be the best descriptor of Babylon the Great
- Many people have tried to figure out literal locations and leaders that translate to this passage
 - The seven heads that are seven hills – any ancient person reading this account would have immediately thought of Rome, which was founded on seven hills – almost no question that they had it in mind

- It fits the pattern of later Rome – imperial power and force capped with incredible wealth and decadence, where you have wonders built – and in those wonders like the Coliseum, you had the slaughter of Christians and gladiators as entertainment for the masses – those who read Revelation could see an example of it within their own lifetimes
- One interpretation over time has been that this is actually the Roman Catholic Church and the church that has fallen away from Christ – it is not this – many problems with Catholic theology, but never a possible understanding for the early church, and one driven by the theological fights of the 16th century
- There are many kings, but I don't believe we can single these kings out – the seventeen kings points to a long timeline
- The powers on earth (that don't get along) fight the Lamb who conquers – “this calls for a mind with wisdom” – the wisest thing for us today might be to say that we do not know – if we try to determine the particular kings in history, we are missing the point – look for signs that the beast and the harlot are on the move
- So what does it mean for us?
 - Take a look at John's reaction to the harlot – he is astonished – in literal Greek, when he stares at her, he wonders in great wonder. This word “wonder” – same used of those who worship the beast.
 - She is dressed like royalty; she has gems and a golden cup; like the beast, she is imitating the clothes and beauty of the holy; even though she drinks the blood of the saints – think of John the Baptist and how he was murdered by one of the Herods for calling out his adultery – she will kill and defame those who won't participate – she's a magnificent fake, so much so that even John is mesmerized for a moment
 - The angel quickly pulls him out of it – “Why do you wonder?” It's a sham, but one that can even draw in the saints
 - The harlot represents spiritual adultery against God – it is the promises of God falsified and made for the here and now rather than the future
 - The harlot always asks, “What's your price?” How much do you want security and safety? Or on the other side, how much do you want liberty and freedom as you understand it? What brings you happiness? What eases your pain and helps you to self-medicate? What makes life comfortable and easy for you?

- The harlot offers all these things, but at the price of spiritual compromise and, eventually, spiritual ruin and death
- *We have to ask the question, “Who or what do I turn to for comfort besides Christ?”* The Heidelberg Catechism, very first question – “My only comfort in life and in death is that I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”
- The harlot says, “You can have more than one comfort.” Some comforts look similar (remember, the devil is a counterfeiter) – a nice home, good friends, good books. But do they push you towards the Savior or away from Him? Does the nice home make you feel secure, or does it remind you that God has given you good gifts? Do your friends pray for you and with you (and do you pray for them), or do they lead you into decadence? Do the books you read, the movies you watch, do they make you want to say, “My hope is in Christ alone,” or do they provide you with nothing but distraction? Does what you post on social media promote Jesus or promote division and strife?
- These get more serious – the harlot always says, “You want this, you need this, you deserve this.” That’s the way affairs start, crime starts, hatred and jealousy and selfish ambition start. But these larger idolatries usually start with smaller ones along the way – ways to self-medicate against pain and hurts, ways to get even with those who’ve hurt us. Does God put roadblocks in our way so we will turn to Him rather than to chase after petty distractions?
- I am not immune! None of us is! But be ruthless. Self-awareness is the first step. First determine to get clear of any blatant idolatries or immoralities, then work with the Spirit to get rid of the subtle ones. Don’t be distracted by false prophets who tell you that God promises His people wealth and health in this life – it wasn’t true for the early church, it isn’t true for us now – Jesus said the rich (who were thought to be blessed in His day) are the ones who have the hardest time turning to God! Don’t forget the harsh language God uses – it is easier to give up temptations when we think of them as prostituting our faith. Harsh but true.
- Last thought – the Lamb will overcome the harlot, the kings, the beast, “because he is Lord of lords and King of kings -- and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.” That’s our goal, to be with Him. Do not fall for the lure of the harlot. It’s so tempting, but it’s a trap.