

“The Great Prostitute”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 24

Texts: Revelation 17:1-18; Jeremiah 51:45-53

Throughout the Book of Revelation, John has warned us about the beast, who wages war upon the saints. Empowered by the dragon, who is Satan, the beast is an apocalyptic symbol of the state, whenever it assumes rights and prerogatives which belong only to God. In John’s day, the beast was the Roman empire, which viewed its emperors as deities who demanded worship so that people were granted the privilege of buying and selling. But John has also warned us of another threat besides that of the beast wielding the sword, and that is the glamour, wealth, seductive power of the city of man, which continually seeks to entice God’s people away from the Savior and into the arms of another, depicted by John in the Book of Revelation as the great prostitute, Babylon the Great.

We move into a new (and final) section of the Book of Revelation. As we saw last time with the seven bowl judgments of Revelation 16, when the cycle of bowl judgments runs its course, God’s wrath will be complete. Intensifying the plagues which came upon Egypt in the days of Moses and the Pharaoh, the first five of the bowl judgments come upon the whole earth and all of its inhabitants. But even in the midst of this final outpouring of the wrath of God, God’s people are spared because they have been sealed with the name of God and of his Christ. All of heaven resounds with the declaration of the angels and the saints before the throne: “Lord God Almighty, just and true are your ways.” For all those who shed the blood of the saints, will now be forced to drink their own blood, an apocalyptic symbol demonstrating that the Holy God will punish all those who hate Christ and his church.

The sixth bowl judgment foretells of a great and final battle resulting in the defeat of Satan and all of those allied with him. This is the Battle of Armageddon, which is Satan’s final assault upon the church. Satan and his all allies (including the beast and the false prophet who deceive the kings of the earth through demonic power) which gather together at Har-Megedon (the Mount of Gathering) for what they anticipate will be the final defeat the kingdom of God. When the symbolic barrier of restraint (the Euphrates River) is removed, the nations rush headlong to assault the Christ’s church in what they think will be the final victory over Christ and his people. But instead of a satanic victory, we will read of Satan’s final defeat in Revelation 19 and 20 when the Devil and all those who serve him are cast into the lake of fire.

And then with the seventh bowl judgment, a great earthquake brings total destruction upon Babylon the Great, the proud and arrogant city of man which stands in the way of the New Jerusalem, even as the city of Jericho prevented Joshua and the people of God from entering the promised land in the days of Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness. When the seventh bowl is poured out, says John in Revelation 16:19, “*The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.*” And while the people of God await that glorious day when Jesus comes like a thief so that they might enter their eternal rest and received the promised inheritance, all of those who worship the dragon and bear his mark, will curse God and refuse to repent, even on the day of judgment as God’s wrath is poured out upon them.

Therefore, as we move into the final chapters of this book, John will set forth in very vivid imagery the final outcome of those who wage war on the saints and who persecute the church the church of Jesus Christ. Given the fact that John is writing to seven churches, facing the beast on a daily basis, the

knowledge that Christ's church is victorious, despite appearances to the contrary, would have brought great comfort. By describing the fate of the dragon and those who serve him, John also points us ahead to the closing scene in the redemptive drama which began at the dawn of time in Genesis 2-3. In the final chapters of Revelation, we are indeed given a glimpse of the glorious outcome of redemptive history.

As this book draws to a close, in Revelation 17-18 we see the destruction of Babylon the Great, the proud and boastful city of man standing in the way of the New Jerusalem which even now is coming down from heaven. Then in Revelation 19 we read of the fate of the beast and the false prophet. All those nations who neglect their proper function in providing for the public good and restraining and punishing evil-doers, and who are instead deceived by the lies of Satan so that they persecute the people of God . . . all those nations will suffer judgment directly alongside the harlot who seduces them.

Next, in Revelation 20, we read of the fate of the dragon. One day, he will be cast into the lake of fire prepared for the Devil and all his angels.¹ In the final chapters of John's vision, Revelation 21-22, John then describes the new heavens and the new earth and all of the glories which await the people of God. So, in this section of Revelation, we are brought from the opening chapters of the Bible and the account of creation, and the fall of the human race into sin, to the glorious scene in the final chapters of the Bible, which is the defeat of our enemies, the recreation of all things, and our glorious inheritance in Christ.

Flowing directly out of the seventh bowl judgment of Revelation 16:17-21, chapters 17-18 describe not only the seductive ways of the harlot Babylon, but detail her final destruction as well.

When we read in verse 1 of Revelation 17, "*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,'*" there is an important contrast being made between the harlot and to the bride, the wife of the Lamb, as set forth in Revelation 21:9. In Revelation 21 John writes, "*One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.'*" Therefore, the account of the harlot in Revelation 18-19, who is, in a sense, the bride of the Beast, and that of the bride of Christ in Revelation 21 will be one of great contrast.²

While very seductive because of her wealth, glamour and celebrity, the beauty of the harlot is temporary and fleeting, lasting John says but "one hour." The harlot is the epitome of impurity and wickedness. But the beauty of the bride of Christ is eternal, since the church is clothed in the perfect righteousness of her bridegroom, and is therefore, a radiant and spotless bride, beautifully adorned for her husband.

The great prostitute, shortly to be identified as Babylon the Great, sits on many waters, also identifying her with the great river of Babylon, the Euphrates, mentioned in the previous chapter. As will we read in verse 15, the fact that John expands this to include many waters, is indicative of the fact that her dominion extends to all "*peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.*" Her sin is depicted in Revelation 17:2, in terms of her adultery, which is a metaphor used throughout the Old Testament for spiritual infidelity, which is idolatry. Says John, "*with her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.*"

¹ Poythress, The Returning King, 159.

² Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 243.

Throughout the writings of Israel's prophets, there are a number of important references to pagan empires and nations, in which they are said to be drunk on military power, or great wealth, or false religion and self-righteousness. In Ezekiel 16:15-34, the prophet speaks of Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness in terms of adultery and prostitution. Israel loves her sinful ways so much she takes lovers without charging them her normal fee. In Nahum 3, we read of God's impending judgment on Ninevah. In Isaiah 23, and Ezekiel 27-28, we read of the prophecies against the cities of Tyre and Sidon, cities which boasted in their great wealth and military power, but which we filled with wickedness. In Jeremiah 50-51 (including our Old Testament lesson) we read of God's impending judgment upon the historic city of Babylon, which had conquered Israel and held God's people in captivity.

Thus when John speaks of the great prostitute who seduces the kings of the earth, he has in mind the culmination all of these Old Testament images. He also has in mind the fourth beast of Daniel 7, namely the city of Rome and the mighty Roman empire which extended to the ends of the earth. For Rome is not only the beast which persecutes the church, but Rome's military prowess, her great cultural attainments and her massive economic power had already seduced a number of Christians. This was clearly seen in the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, when John mentions that the church in Thyatira tolerated the false teaching of Jezebel, while Christians in Laodicea placed great confidence in their wealth and success even though they actually are poor, blind and naked, and about to come under the judgment of Christ.

Through the use of apocalyptic imagery, John not only has in the mind the city of Rome and the Roman empire which was even then both the beast and the harlot, the great prostitute Babylon the Great also symbolizes the city of man in every age, which through wealth, celebrity, and luxury, seduces Christians away from Christ into the arms of the bride of the dragon, and who, after the seduction, will leave them with nothing, much the same way a female black widow spider kills its mate after he has fulfilled his obligation to his bride. Therefore, the harlot is Rome, while at the same time is symbolic of any idolatrous nation or empire which persecutes Christ and his church, and which attacks the church, not with the sword, but through seduction. Like most harlots, who think their actions will gain them love and affection, it will not be long before her pimp, the beast, will cast her away the moment her glory fades.

Just as the prophet Isaiah had been taken away into the wilderness to witness four horsemen (described in Isaiah 21:9), one of whom brings destruction upon Babylon when all her idols were smashed on the ground, John is now caught away to same wilderness where he now witnesses the destruction of Babylon the Great. There are a number of important things in view here. As we read in verse 3, "*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.*" Recall that in Revelation 13, John was also spirited away into the wilderness to witness God protect the woman (Israel) from the Dragon. Now he sees a different woman, the harlot. Just as Israel was hidden away in the wilderness to be spared from the assault of the dragon, to protect her so that she might later receive her promised inheritance in the heavenly city, in a great reversal, the glittery and wealthy Babylon the Great, will be left desolate (a wilderness) after God's judgment falls upon her. The great irony is surely intentional.

We know that this particular woman is not Israel because she is the one who seduces the nations and intoxicates the kings of the earth with her great wealth. Instead of being hidden away in the wilderness and protected by God, this woman rides the beast—that same beast whom John had witnessed rising out of the sea, the beast with ten horns and seven heads, the same beast who is covered with blasphemous names and colored scarlet—the same as the dragon of Revelation 13:1 who attempted to attack Israel. Furthermore, this woman is dressed to seduce. According to John, she was "*dressed in purple and*

scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls,” an image of a temple prostitute, something well-known to John’s first century readers. Her cosmetic beauty makes her a kind of counterfeit to the true bride, the bride of Christ. Hers is an earthly glory, not the heavenly glory of the righteousness of Christ. Her gross idolatry is symbolized by the fact that *“she held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.”* This is the drink (idolatry) which intoxicates the kings of the earth so that they commit spiritual adultery with her. She is clearly identified in verse 5 along with her crimes. *“This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”*

Having seduced the kings of the earth and allying herself with the beast to earn his favor, she too is held responsible for her actions which result in the persecution of the church. Thus John can say of her, *“I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.”* As one writer so aptly puts it: *“[The harlot’s] seductive influence and the beast’s coercive violence are symbiotic; the nations bow to Rome not simply because its legions suppress insurrection (the beast), but also because Rome’s far-flung administrative efficiency maintains societal stability and economic prosperity (the harlot). The threat of force and the allure of affluence work perfectly together, so, of course, Babylon celebrates the slaughter of Jesus’ people, since they refuse to buy into her economic interests.”*³ When Christians refuse to take the mark of the beast so as to buy and sell, they also cut into the wealth and power of the harlot, thus she celebrates the death of the saints, even as does the beast. Although she is intoxicated by her apparent success, because of this, her fate is sealed.

This amazing connection between the power of the sword (the beast) and the seduction of temptress (the harlot) moves John to declare: *“When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.”* It is almost as if, having seen for the first time how the power of beast and the attraction of the harlot come together in the form of the Roman empire, John now understands as he never did before, the great power of the dragon over the peoples of the earth. And John is amazed! But not for long. In verse 7, John tells us that it was at this point *“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 explanation of the mystery is as follows: *“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.”* The beast is a counterfeit of Christ, for he was, is not, and is yet to come. John has already told us that one of the beast’s heads was slain, a reference to the Nero myth and to the fact that the Roman empire suffered what appeared to be a mortal wound, only to come back stronger than ever. At the time of John’s writing, the beast, in the form of the Roman empire was already persecuting the church. But John now speaks of a future beast yet to come, something implied by the sixth bowl judgment when three demonic spirits deceive the kings of the earth, gathering them for battle against Christ’s church at the Mount of Gathering, Armageddon.⁴

This will occur when the beast comes up out of the abyss, which John tells us in Revelation 20, comes at the end of the thousand years, or the millennial age. This is a reference to the great apostasy mentioned there by John when he says in Revelation 20:7-10: *“When the thousand years are over, Satan will be*

³ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 246.

⁴ Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb*, 248.

released from his prison [the Abyss] and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God’s people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” The beast comes up from the abyss at the time of his destruction, when those whose names were not written in the Book of Life are also to be judged. This means that all of the events foretold in Revelation are fulfilled at the time of Christ’s second advent.

There are two important points we should draw from this. One, this means the Battle of Armageddon, the sixth bowl, the seventh trumpet, the sixth and seventh bowl judgments, the judgment of the beast, the false prophet and Satan, all occur at the same time. According to Revelation 20, this is when the thousand years are over (the millennium), that is, immediately before Christ returns to earth at the end of the age. Therefore, the millennium of Revelation 20 is a present reality lying between the first and second coming of Christ and is not a future hope.

Second, the beast of John’s day and age (the Roman empire), will be resurrected through the power of Satan, in those days before our Lord’s return. When this resurrection of the beast occurs, the whole world will be amazed. But it also means that judgment day is at hand.

In Revelation 17:9, the angel reminds John, *“This calls for a mind with wisdom,”* just as it did to understand the mysterious 666 the number of the beast. The first matter is that *“the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits,”* which is mostly likely a reference to the city of Rome, famous for it seven hills. But throughout the prophets, mountains are often symbolic of great power and are mentioned in connection with the rule of pagan empires, hence the fact that the seven mountains, *“are also seven kings.”* Seven mountains and seven kings not only refer to the city of Rome and its empire, persecuting the church even while John was writing, but the apocalyptic symbolism as used here refers to the fact first mentioned in Revelation 13:7, that the beast was given authority over every people, nation and tongue and nation, and reiterated again here of the harlot who sits on many waters, and who seduces many peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.⁵

Verses 10-11 are probably the most difficult verses to interpret in all of Revelation. Indeed, the angel has said it calls for wisdom. *“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.”* There are probably as many theories as to what this means, as there are commentators. Most try and correlate these seven kings to the four great empires of Daniel 7:17, or to the succession of Roman emperors beginning with either Julius Caesar or Augustus down through eight successive emperors, with the supposition that five emperors have come and gone, and that John is writing during the reign of the sixth emperor (the one who is). But although there may be merit to this approach, perhaps it is better not to view this succession of kings historically, but theologically.⁶

The number seven, as we have seen, is the number of fullness or completion. If we look at the angel’s words with this in mind, it is possible that the seven kings represent the entire history of fallen humanity.

⁵ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 248-249.

⁶ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 251.

By the time of the coming of Christ, five of these empires have come and gone, with John and his readers facing the sixth (Rome), with a seventh yet to come, who will remain for but a short time, which is the same period of time John has already mentioned in Revelation 12:12 to refer to the short time remaining for the dragon after his defeat at Calvary's cross. According to the angel, after these seven kings have come and gone, one of the earlier kings, connected to the beast re-appears, as an eighth king who will go to his destruction. This, it seems to me, indicate that however we understand the relationship of seven kings to the emperors of Rome, we should not overlook the fact that with these words, we are fast-forwarded from the time of John to the time of the end.

When the eighth king appears, probably in direct connection to the release of the beast from the abyss, we are once again given a picture of that final battle of Armageddon, when Satan seeks to destroy the kingdom of God only to be destroyed himself. If true, this means we can expect an unprecedented manifestation of Satanic power, taking the form of a world-wide empire which is the final manifestation of the beast with the seductive attraction of the harlot reaching full flower. And like it was in the days of Rome, the final beast will amaze the world through its military power, its great wealth, and the deification of its leaders. While the whole world is amazed and worships the beast, the beast is seeking a final victory over Christ's church. Therefore the time of the end may be characterized by unsurpassed peace and prosperity, while at the same time the world's worship of the beast, leads to unsurpassed persecution of God's people.

This same apocalyptic pattern follows with the ten kings depicted in verses 12-14. *"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."* Like the seven kings, the ten kingdoms, depicted by the ten horns, will likewise do the bidding of the beast. These are probably the same kings mentioned in Revelation 16 in connection with the sixth bowl judgment who are deceived by the three demon spirits, and who gather together at Armageddon to wage war on the church, depicted here, by the mention that these kings wage war on the Lamb and his chosen and faithful followers. And like the dragon, the beast, the false prophet, these ten kingdoms cannot prevail over the King of Kings.

But what is perhaps the most amazing thing about this vision, is John's description of the fate of the harlot. Although she has served the beast and done his bidding, she suffers the same fate as those she has seduced and then jilted. As the saying goes, "what goes around, comes around." In verse 15, we learn of the harlot's fate. *"Then the angel said to me, 'The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. 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.'"*

When the time of the end finally comes, Satan's kingdom will be divided against itself, the first casualty being the harlot. The very same kings and nations who committed spiritual adultery with her, will now turn on her, strip her naked, and then burn and destroy her. Just as ancient Rome fell under the weight of its own immorality when sacked by the very nations who profited from Roman trade and order, so too, the final manifestation of the harlot will see her come to an end at the hands of those whom she had seduced. Ironically, the beast will himself become the agent by which God brings judgment upon the great prostitute. For God puts it in the beast's heart to hate the harlot. In Revelation 18, we will read of two angels and a voice from heaven who will explain the meaning of the demise of the great prostitute.

But what should be apparent to those who read this prophecy, is that the glories of the city of man are superficial and fleeting. The beauty, celebrity and wealth of the great prostitute are illusory. The harlot uses her charms to lead us away from our bridegroom, Jesus Christ, so that we might become involved in her idolatrous adulteries. Let us never forget that true beauty is only found in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. For he purifies us from all our sins. His blood washes away every imperfection. He is making us into a holy people, without spot or blemish. And for this, the beast and the harlot will hate us. And so will the world which worships them.

But in Jesus Christ, we will overcome them all, just as he has.