

The Great Harlot Revelation 17:1-18 Pastor John Miller

We come to the third and last parenthetical section of Revelation, chapters 17-18. The first parenthetical section is chapter 7, the second one is chapters 10-15 and the third is chapters 17-18. The book of Revelation is not all written in chronological order. Even chapter 17 has some things that are not in chronological order.

In these two chapters, 17 and 18, John has a vision of the fall of Babylon. Notice that in Revelation 18:2, the angel cries, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen." These two chapters are a unit, and the summary of them is the fall or destruction of Babylon.

There are three realities behind the word "Babylon." There is the city of Babylon, there is the empire of Babylon and there is the system of Babylon, which is what we come to in chapters 17 and 18. The city of Babylon came to its zenith under King Nebuchadnezzar. But in Revelation, "Babylon" refers to an evil system. And this evil system comes in two categories: an evil, false, religious system and a political, commercial, economic system. When John says, "Love not the world," he's talking about the evil, world system apart from God and its way of doing things. He's not talking about planet earth. So when we talk about Babylon, we're talking about an evil system, either religious or commercial.

When we say "Wall Street," there is an actual Wall Street in New York, but we also use the term to convey a financial system. We use the term "Madison Avenue" to convey the concept of an advertising system. And when we use the word "Hollywood," we don't always mean the portion of Los Angeles that has the big sign on the mountain saying "Hollywood." We use it sometimes to mean the film industry. When I looked up the word "Hollywood," it was also defined as "fleshly and vulgar."

So the Babylonian system is one that we, as Christians, should come out of. God says in the Bible, "Touch no unclean thing."

In chapter 17, we see God's judgment and destruction on the evil, false, religious system. It is referred to in verse 5 as "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth." This verse is in the Bible, and "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God." You may read this chapter and wonder how anyone can understand it, but remember this book is called "Revelation," or "Apocalypse," which means "unveiling." It's not the concealing; it's the unveiling. God wants us to understand it.

The rapture is the next thing on God's prophetic calendar. And what happens at the rapture sets the stage for what we read about in chapter 17. At the rapture, every born-again, true Christian will be "caught up" off of planet earth. The word "rapture" comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:17. In the Greek, it's the word "harpodzo," which means "to snatch up" or "to catch up by force." And I believe the rapture happens before the tribulation.

Can you imagine how dark the world is going to be when all true believers, who are “the light of the world,” are taken off of planet earth? Yet many churches that are just professing Christian churches but are not really true Christian churches will continue like nothing has happened. The Sunday after the rapture happens, there will still be some preachers who will be in the pulpit, and there will be people in the pews who will wonder what happened to all those fundamentalist, crazy Christians. The liberal churches will continue to go on and on.

Then those churches remaining are going to merge into one, big, ecumenical, ecclesiastical, apostate system known, in Revelation 17, as “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” That’s what many are going to encounter.

Satan’s number one tactic has always been not to fight against the church but to infiltrate and join the church. Billy Graham said, “Vance Havner was the most quotable preacher in America in his day. He said these words: ‘Satan is not fighting churches; he’s joining them. He does more by sowing tares than by pulling up wheat. He accomplishes more by imitation than by outright opposition.’” Satan is in the church. The Bible says he is an “angel of light” imitating those who are preachers of the true Gospel. He perverts the Gospel.

So we need to fundamentally understand that there is the true and the false. There are the genuine believers, the true bride, the body of Christ who make up the church and then there are the false believers who are merely professing but do not possess true salvation.

Now we’re going to be looking at “Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots,” this false religious system. And there are three things I want you to note in our text today. The first is that the harlot is exposed, in verses 1-6. John said, “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came.” Remember back in chapter 16 there were seven angels who had the seven bowls of God’s wrath. First we had the seven seals, next we had the seven trumpets and then we had the seven bowls.

Now one of the seven bowl angels “...talked with me, saying to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters.’” This is the theme of chapter 17. The angel was basically saying, “I’m going to show you how God is going to judge this great harlot.”

Verse 2, “...with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.’ So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: ‘Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.’ I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.”

John is basically saying that the vision he was given was an enigma to him; he was in awe of it.

He really didn't know what was going on. We'll find in the next section of this chapter that God will explain these images and symbols so we can understand them.

There are five facts about the harlot I want you to know in these first six verses. First, in verses 1-2, she is a great harlot. She's not just a harlot, but she's a "great harlot," because she encompasses the whole world. It's an ecumenical movement; the religions all join together under one umbrella and become a one-world religion. In verse 1, the angel said, "I will show you the judgment of the great harlot." God will judge false religion.

And with this great harlot, "the kings of the earth committed fornication," verse 2. This "fornication" is actually spiritual adultery or spiritual infidelity. He's not talking about physical fornication; he's talking about adultery in our relationship to God. People turn away from God and worship other gods. "And the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication."

In verse 1, the symbolism of "many waters" will be explained in verse 15 to mean "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues." And in verse 2, the angel said that the world leaders and the people of the world have become intoxicated by this great religious system.

Now why does God use the figure of a harlot? God uses the imagery of a harlot all through the Old Testament. In Isaiah 1:21 and in Ezekiel 16:8, He uses the imagery of Israel turning away from God, Jehovah, their Maker and their husband, by worshipping other gods as spiritual adultery, spiritual fornication or spiritual immorality. So he uses the term "harlot" as symbolism of turning away from God and worshipping the false gods of the heathen nations that are around them. And the same imagery is used in the New Testament for the church.

This woman is a harlot, but the church is the bride of Christ. She is pure and clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We are engaged to Him, and we will be wed to Him.

When the professing church apostatizes or turns away from the faith, it's written about in 2 Peter and in Jude. That's why Jude 3 says that we should "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." "Contend" means "to fight." We don't fight physically, but in the realm of doctrine. We should fight for doctrine or for the truth of orthodox Christianity. Christianity is not progress or changing and we're not adding to it. "Once for all," God delivered the faith, and we are to defend it and stand on it. So this term is used of the church today.

As I look around the world today, I see the world stage set for this mystery, Babylon, the mother of harlots. Have you seen the "Coexist" bumper stickers? Mystery, Babylon, the mother of harlots. That's not what it means, but it means "Let's all get along. All religions are the same. All paths lead to God. Let's get all the religions of the world together and all love one another. Let's put aside our doctrine, which actually conflicts." People say all religions are the same, but they're not. Christianity is true and the others are false.

If you stand up in our "coexist" culture of today and say, "No, 'Jesus is the way, the truth and the

life;” and you keep quoting the verse—which Jesus Himself gave—that means that no one comes to the Father, gets to heaven or can be saved apart from Jesus Christ. The Bible says, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

Today we have what’s called “progressive Christianity.” That means they are Christian in name only. But they have this great, all-encompassing acceptance of all faiths and religions as being equally valid. Our culture today—and it’s coming to the professing church—believes that there is no such thing as absolute truth. We are dealing with a culture that has literally abandoned absolute truth. So if you stand up and say this is true but that is wrong, they say, “Who are you to say that’s wrong?” They’ll say you’re bigoted and narrow-minded. They’ll say you’re bad and will put you down. It’s actually spilled over into our politics today. “You can’t believe that, you can’t do that, because you’re a bad person. We’re tolerant, but not of you, because we don’t believe what you believe. So we’re intolerant of your intolerance.” It doesn’t make any sense.

All of this has come into the church. So we have the true church, and we have the false church. Don’t be deceived; it’s sometimes hard to tell. Sometimes we look at the size of a church. Sometimes we look at the money of a church or its influence. Sometimes we look at the popularity of a church. Sometimes we look at the charisma or the personality of the leader of a church. Those things enamor us so we don’t pay attention to the doctrine of a church—whether it is true or false. There is nothing more important for us living in this deceptive age today than to be given to sound doctrine, the healthy truth of God’s Word. And the Bible is our source for that.

There is a loss of doctrinal truth in our culture today. And it has infiltrated the church. Oprah Winfrey claims to be a Christian, but she says that God can’t be the only way to God. She claims either that we are all gods or that we all have God in us. She recommends a lot of New Age books and New Age concepts under the name of “Christianity.”

So there will be this all-encompassing, ecumenical, ecclesiastical church that will come together after the rapture. This false, professing church will come together and exist under the name Mystery, Babylon, the mother of harlots. So this harlot is great and all-encompassing.

The second fact about this harlot is that she is allied with the Antichrist, the political leader, verse 3. John says, “So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman...”—there she is—“...sitting on a scarlet beast.” This scarlet beast is the Antichrist of Revelation 13:1. Scarlet is the color of Satan. And this beast, “...which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.”

In this chapter, in verse 9, the seven heads of verse 3 are explained to represent the seven mountains of Rome. And the ten horns of verse 3 are ten kings, as explained in verse 12. So the harlot has aligned the false, religious system with the Antichrist. She rides on the beast, uses the beast for her purposes and then the beast turns against her and destroys her.

Then, thirdly, the harlot has great wealth. This prostitute or harlot or woman “was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.”

There are four prominent women in the book of Revelation. The first one is Jezebel, in Revelation 2:20. She represents the apostate church in Thyatira. The second one is Israel in Revelation 12:1. She is the woman who gave birth to the man-child, Christ. The third one is in our text today, the great harlot. Then the fourth one is in Revelation 21:9, the church, the bride of Christ, the true believers. What we have in our text today is a false imitation of the true church of Jesus Christ.

It says that she has great wealth, so no wonder John says in verse 6, “I marveled with great amazement.” This was an enigma to John, because the church was poor in his day. The church was destitute, afflicted and “They wandered about in sheepskins and in goatskins,” as Hebrews 11:37 tells us. They were persecuted. They suffered. But this false church, this false system, is sitting upon this ecumenical movement of the Antichrist. They had political power and great wealth.

There are those who believe that this mystery, Babylon, the mother of harlots, is exclusively the Roman Catholic Church. In the midst of the description you can kind of see Roman Catholicism. And the place of the harlot's operation is Rome. The “seven heads” are the seven hills on which the woman sits.

But I don't believe this exclusively describes the Roman Catholic Church. I believe it is the apostate branches of Roman Catholicism, along with the apostate branches of Protestantism. So it is an ecumenical, ecclesiastical group of churches, denominations and religions.

We have seen in America a great decline of the traditional, Christian denominations. It's getting very difficult to find a good Methodist church. It's getting very difficult to find a good Presbyterian church, unless it's basically a reformed Presbyterian church. There are a lot of liberal branches in the Baptist church. All the main-line denominations have large segments that are splitting, going liberal and open up to all kinds of crazy doctrines, so they're not orthodox Christianity churches anymore. So we need to be discerning on what is truth and what is error.

So the problem will be that there is going to be a binding together, no doubt, of much of Roman Catholicism and all of the mystery religions that are tied into that with Eastern mysticism and Jewish legalism. It will be like New Age concepts all coming under the umbrella of mystery, Babylon, this mother of harlots.

Notice, fourthly, that the harlot is a federation of harlots, verse 5. “And on her forehead a name was written: Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth.” So she's a mystery, she has the Babylonian background of religious system and she is great in that she is the mother of harlots. “The mother of harlots” indicates that it is a federation

of apostate, false religions.

And the reference to “Babylon,” in verse 5, indicates it goes back in its origin to the system of Babylon, which is a man-made religious system apart from God. In Genesis 10 and 11, Nimrod started all the false religious systems of the world. Right after the flood, God told the people in Babylon—which didn’t exist at that time but later became Babylon—to disperse and repopulate the earth. But they refused. They raised their fists against God, rebelled against Him and built a tower so they could all come together and reach up to the heavens. It wasn’t just a little lookout tower; this was a pagan place of worship. It’s called a “ziggurat.” Archeologists have unearthed them in Israel today. People would go up on the top of this tower and worship the stars and constellations. So this was a pagan religion that was birthed in Babylon.

Others like to go into detail about Nimrod’s wife, Semiramis, and her son, Horus, which she claims was born without the agency of the father. He died and rose from the dead, so they try to tie that into Roman Catholicism. But I think Christians make a mistake in getting too bogged down in a lot of those details, rather than understanding that this is just one, great, ecumenical movement of all these false religions coming together under one umbrella, mystery, Babylon, the mother of harlots.

The fifth characteristic of the harlot, in verse 6, is that she persecutes the saints. John says, “I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.”

All the way back when Cain slew his brother, Abel, that’s where it started. Cain brought the works of his own hands to God, but Abel brought a blood sacrifice. It represents the two religions. One way is to try to earn your own way to heaven by your own efforts. The other way is that you trust in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the Cross. You’re either in Cain or you’re in Abel. You’re either in Babylon or you’re in the true church of Jesus Christ.

So the persecution of the saints comes from a religious source. Jesus was put to death by the religious community of His day. I think of the Inquisition and all the true believers who were put to death during that period of time in the Dark Ages. So the harlot persecutes the saints.

Now we move from the harlot exposed to the harlot explained, in verses 7-15. We will see the explanation of the image of the beast, of the seven heads and ten horns and of the many waters.

Verse 7 says, “But the angel said to me, ‘Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns.’” Before the angel breaks it down and explains it, he actually makes a promise to John. And before he makes a promise to John, he asked John, “Why are you marveling?” I would ask, “Why are you freaking out?” As I’m reading this, I’m asking, “What’s going on?” To John, this great harlot riding on this scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns is a great mystery.

So the angel explains about the beast, in verse 8. “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and

will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition.” In other words, he’s going to come from the abussos and go back to the abussos. “And those who dwell on the earth...”—this is the term for the unsaved during the tribulation—“...will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world...”—true believers are written in that Book of Life—“...when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.”

This beast is the Antichrist. Revelation 11:7 is the same description of him coming out of the abussos and then he goes back to perdition. Now it is describing him again here. Also Revelation 13:1 describes “a beast rising up out of the sea.”

Now it says in verse 7, “And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world.” If you’re a Christian and have been born again, God chose you before you were ever born, and your name was written down in that Book of Life. That’s God’s sovereign, elective purpose. Yes, you repented and yes, you believed, and your name is written in that Book of Life.

So those who do not believe in Jesus and do not trust in Jesus will not be saved. They worship this beast, and this beast is being dominated by this woman, this mystery, Babylon.

Then in verse 9, the angel describes the seven heads. “Here is the mind which has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits.” Rome is described by its poets as “the city that sits on seven hills.” So this is most likely a reference to the city of Rome. And that is made clear in verse 18.

Then the angel goes on to say, in verses 10-11, “There are also seven kings.” So there are two different sevens: seven heads, which are the hills of Rome, and the seven kings. “Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.”

When he says there that of the kings, “five have fallen,” there is some confusion about who these five fallen kings are. I think they are kingdoms. I believe it refers to Egypt, Syria, Babylon, Medo-Persia and Greece. These will be the five kingdoms that have opposed Israel and have now fallen.

In verse 10 the angel says, “one is.” That would be the sixth kingdom, which is Rome. When John was writing this prophetic book, the Roman government controlled the world. And he says, “He must continue a short time.”

Verse 11 says, “The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.” So the sixth is Rome, and the seventh kingdom, which is yet to come, is a revived Roman Empire made up of ten western nations that are federated under the leadership of the Antichrist. And likened unto the eighth kingdom is the Antichrist, who comes out of the seventh, that revived Roman Empire, and comes to power.

Now in verses 12-14, the angel describes the ten horns, which are ten kings. "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful." "Called, chosen and faithful" is a description of the bride of Christ, the true church, the body of Christ, the true believers.

Then he describes the "many waters" of verse 1 in verse 15. Then he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."

I know that reading this over is very challenging. But basically you have two entities: you have the harlot, which is an evil, false religious system, and you have the beast. The harlot rides on the beast, so they are united together. There is a religious system and a political system that are united together. The Antichrist will use the religious system, and the religious system will use the Antichrist to come to power. But we'll see that when the Antichrist is done with the woman, he destroys her at the end of the chapter.

But the Lord comes back, in verse 14, and this is where it gets a little challenging. Verse 14 should be the last verse in the chapter. Even though it's a parenthetical chapter, verse 14 happens at the Second Coming. "These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them..."—that is, the ten nations under the Antichrist, the scarlet-colored beast—"...for He is Lord of lords and King of kings." That is going to happen in chapter 19, at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

So it gets a little confusing, because when you come to the end of the chapter, it goes back to the midpoint of the tribulation, where the Antichrist, or this beast, destroys the woman. And the Lord returns, in verse 14, and destroys this confederation of nations. So these ten horns are ten kings.

Now, in closing, we see the harlot is extinguished, destroyed or judged, in verses 16-18. He says, "And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot." This event probably happens in the middle of the tribulation, about three-and-a-half years before the Second Coming. They will "...make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire." So at the midpoint of the tribulation, the political leader, Antichrist, will destroy this religious system; God will use him to judge her. Notice verse 17, "For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast." It's referring to God, Who is sovereign, putting in the heart of this evil, political system of Antichrist to destroy this harlot that exists at this time.

So God sovereignly uses evil to judge evil. Think about that. God uses evil for His purposes. He sits sovereignly in heaven. So it is "until the words of God are fulfilled."

Verse 18, "And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the

earth.” This is why people connect the harlot with Roman Catholicism; it’s because of the seat she has in the city of Rome. This is also the seat of the religious and political power during the time of the tribulation.

What happens is that the rapture takes place, no true believers are left, only the professing Christians. They are tares who were among the wheat, but there has been the separation in the rapture. These churches go on and continue to exist and basically decide to have a “harmonic conversion”; they put aside doctrine.

That sounds like our culture today. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe in the virgin birth. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe in the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe that the Bible is the only, true Word of God. It doesn’t matter if you don’t believe the Bible is inerrant, infallible and inspired by God.

In fact, these false Christians use the word “inspired,” but they have a different definition. They use the same vocabulary but a different dictionary. It sounds so Christian. It sounds so good. And all the true Christians are gone at this time, “So let’s all join hands and sing ‘Kumbaya’! Everybody’s going to heaven. There is no hell.”

It’s already happening in what Bible students call “Christendom.” That’s a term used for Christianity without Christ, a Christless Christianity. You can’t do that. Christianity is Christ. It’s His Incarnation, His virgin birth, His Crucifixion, His Resurrection, His bodily Ascension into heaven, His coming again to earth—that’s Christianity. Anything less is not Christianity. It’s so very important for you to know the Word of God, even today, before the rapture happens.

In 1 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul says to Timothy, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith...”—they will apostatize from true Christianity—“...giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron.”

This is what is happening today. So what is our defense? It’s in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. This is the classic passage on the Scriptures. What is so important for you to do is to have a right view of the Bible. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...” That literally means that all Scripture is God-breathed. God superintended the human authors so the very words they wrote were the very words of God. “...and is profitable...”—take note of that—“...for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” “Doctrine” is what is right or true, “reproof” is what is wrong or false, “correction” is how to get right and “instruction in righteousness” is how to live right.

This is actually teaching the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture. You don’t need some other religious book or some other religious writing. All you need is the Word of God. “All things that pertain to life and godliness” are found in the Bible. So it is given by inspiration of God, it’s profitable to tell us what is right, what is wrong, how to get right and how to live right. Then it

equips us, in 2 Timothy 3:17, so that the man or woman of God “may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

The Bible is unique. It's not the same as other religious books. It's not the Koran. It's not the Book of Mormon. It's not the Pearl of Great Price. It's God's living, powerful, sufficient, clear, active Word. It's our only road map and guide. It's our only standard for absolute truth.

How do we know what's right? How do we know what's wrong? How do we know what's true? How do we know anything about God? How do we know if there's a heaven? How do we know if there's a hell? How do we know where we came from? How do we know why we're here? How do we know where we're going? The answers are all found in the Bible.

Christians are to be people of The Book, God's Word. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Don't be deceived in these last days. Be discerning. Be careful of those who minimize doctrinal truth for experience. Be careful.