The Book of Revelation

Zanesville, OH | Wednesday/Sunday Bible Study

**Chapter 17**

* **17:1-7– The Vision of Babylon the Great**
  + As chapter 16 came to an end, we were told that Babylon the great was destroyed and split in three parts. Chapters 17-19 go into more detail concerning this destruction and the reason they were destroyed.
  + **Verse 1**– One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls speaks with John and intends to show him the judgment of the “great harlot.” As will be seen over the course of this chapter and the next, the imagery of a prostitute or harlot is intended to recall a host of OT passages that deal with rejection of God and idolatrous practices (cf. Isa. 23:15-18; Jer. 2:20-31; 3:6-11; Ezek. 16:15-63; 23:1-49; Hos. 1:3; 2:5-13: Nah. 3:4).
  + The harlot is said to sit on “many waters” which is a clear reference to Jer. 51:13 which deals with the judgment to come on Babylon. John uses such wording to apply to the destruction of Babylon the Great here in Revelation. Sitting also denotes power and sovereignty.
  + **Verse 2**– The kings of the earth and the earth-dwellers are said to have engaged in relations with the prostitute and they have committed great acts of immorality. Whether this is idol worship with reference to pagan practices, emperor worship or other acts of abomination, the point is that these things are all ungodly.
  + The harlot seduces the earth-dwellers and she makes them drunk with the wine of her immorality (cf. 14:8). These acts of immorality are enticing to many and many engage in it because of its worldly pleasures (cf. Matt. 7:13).
  + **Verse 3**– John was carried away “in the spirit” (cf. Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 11:1; 43:5; Rev. 1:10; 4:2) to see this judgment. He is taken to the “desert” which is an allusion to Isa. 21:1-10. The desert of 12:6, 14 is not the same one here.
  + The desert based on Isa. 21:1-10 is a place where fierce creatures and evil beasts dwell. It is associated with sin, judgment and desolation. This is further solidified as John sees the woman (harlot) sitting on a scarlet beast.
  + This beast is the same beast of 13:1 because of the description of having seven heads and ten horns. This description also ties the origin and loyalty of the beast and the woman to the dragon (12:3). The scarlet beast is full of blasphemous names as well (cf. 13:1, 5-6).
  + The scarlet color is associated with luxury, splendor and royalty (cf. Matt. 27:28). Revelation presents two women (character/position/destiny). One is the woman clothed with sun with the moon under her feet while having a crown of twelve stars on her head (12:1). She represents the faithful people of God and she is protected by God in the wilderness (12:6, 13-17).
  + She is also equated with the holy city, the new Jerusalem (11:2; 21:2, 10). She is said to be the bride of the Lamb (19:7; 21:2, 9). Everything about this woman is glorious, righteous and magnificent.
  + The other woman is the one we have seen here in this chapter. She is the antithesis of the woman clothed with the sun. This woman is clothed in earthly splendor (17:3-4) in contrast to the heavenly splendor of the faithful woman. She is also in the desert but a different kind of desert.
  + The woman here is described as a prostitute (harlot) because of what she does and how she does it. She is impure, unfaithful and detestable in the sight of God. She is equated with the great city that is destroyed: Babylon the Great (11:8; 16:9; 17:18; 18:10). She, unlike the previous woman, will be destroyed and not protected.
  + **Verse 4**– John sees the woman (harlot) arrayed in what many would believe to be luxurious and expensive material. The entire description of the woman is very physical and material leaving the reader with no doubt whatsoever about the kind of character she has (cf. 1 Pet. 3:3-4).
  + Her attire and possessions point to the economic success of Babylon the Great. She is a symbol of trade and economic success that dominate the lives of the earth-dwellers (cf. 1 Tim. 6:9-10).
  + In 1 Timothy 6, Paul argues that an obsession over money and material is directly propionate to being immoral (1 Tim. 6:11, 17). All these things his will be expounded upon more in chapter 18.
  + Purple and scarlet were two materials that were very expensive to extract and only the elite rubbed shoulders with such materials (cf. Judg. 8:26; Dan. 5:7). In John’s day the description of all these materials fit Rome very well.
  + In addition to her attire, she has a golden cup in her hand with which she intoxicates the world (cf. Jer. 51:7; Rev. 14:8). Her physical attractiveness seduces men to commit immorality with her by drinking from this cup. Everything about this woman is pleasing to the physical eye but what’s behind it is abominable and destructive (cf. Gen. 3:6; Matt. 7:15; 15:18-20; 23:25-28).
  + In contrast to this woman, the faithful woman in Revelation is clothed with fine linen which is bright and clean (19:8). She is pure and righteous and cleansed by the blood of the Lamb unlike the harlot who is impure, unrighteous and in desperate need of cleansing.
  + **Verse 5**– On the forehead of the woman is a “mystery.” This word is similar to that of 11:8 and the idea is that the name is symbolic and metaphorical. It conveys a concept. Names on the forehead in Revelation represent a person’s true character and it serves as an indication of where their loyalty lies (7:3; 13:16-18; 14:1, 9; 20:4; 22:4).
  + This is also true in this verse. The name given the woman is a description of her character and purpose. The name identifies her with Babylon the Great and she is the mother of all harlots (center for idolatry and all things corrupt and unclean). Together these things make her the abominations of all abominations.
  + **Verse 6**– John sees the woman drunk with the blood of the saints (cf. 2:13; 6:9-10; 12:11; 13:7, 15; 16:6). The saints are being killed because they do not submit to the harlot and her practices. They remain steadfast to Jesus even if it means economic failure and losing their lives (cf. 2:9-10). John is taken aback at all he sees.
  + **Verse 7**– John’s response is typical of vision of that nature. Daniel experienced something similar (Dan. 4:19; 7:15, 28; 8:27). The angel responds to John and assures him that he will make know the mystery of the woman and the beast. The angel will go into more detail about what John has been seeing.
* **17:8-18– The Interpretation of the Vision**
  + **Verse 8**– The beast John sees is described as “was, and is not, and is about to come up…” This is intended to be a parody of the eternal description of God and also the resurrection of Jesus (1:8, 17-18; 2:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). The beast in 13:3, 12, 14 is said to be slain but his wound was “apparently” healed.
  + It is difficult to pin down the beasts’ power in terms of its rising and falling to a particular time in history during the Roman empire. It is true that Nero persecuted and killed many saints (“*the beast was*”) and that for a period of time after the Christians were persecuted less (“*and is not”*) until full fledge systematic persecution of the saints began shortly after the writing of this book (“*about to come up out of the abyss”*).
  + Although the saints are already suffering in a variety of ways when Revelation is written to them (2:9, 13, 20; 3:9), the book anticipates great persecution to come especially in relation to an attack from the beast (2:10, 3:10; 11; 6:11; 11:7-8; 13:7, 15). So in this light, the beast was and is not but is about to come up out of the abyss.
  + The mission of the beast is not surprising given his origins. His coming up out of an abyss (cf. 11:7) equates him with the devil and demonic forces as seen in chapter 9 (9:1-2; 11). The beast destroys and makes war with the forces of good and those who hold fast to the word of God.
  + Additionally, this description of the beast (who was, is not and is about to come up) will be tied to Satan in Rev. 20:1-10. They share the same goal and same mind. And although they will come up, it will not be to their victory but to their demise.
  + Daniel prophesies of the coming of a beast who will persecute the people of God and perform blasphemies but his destiny with be the same as Satan. They will be destroyed and thrown to the fire by the Sovereign King (Dan. 7:11, 25-26).
  + The response of the earth-dwellers to the beasts “apparent” healing is the same as in 13:3-4. They are amazed because they haven’t seen such power (cf. Dan. 2:40-43; 7:7-8, 19-20, 23). They are enamored by the physical and have no concern for the spiritual. This is evidenced by the fact that their names are not in the book of life (cf. Dan. 7:10; Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27).
  + **Verses 9-10**– The subsequent verses (9-18) can be understood by the mind which has wisdom (cf. Dan. 11:33; 12:10; Rev. 13:18). This wisdom is that which is from above (Jam. 1:5; 3:13-18). The angel tells John that the beasts’ seven heads are “seven mountains.”
  + Some suggest that this is a reference to the seven hills on which Rome was built. Such a meaning may not be out of this scope but like most of the book, the proper meaning likely comes from a symbolic origin.
  + The use of the word “mountain” as a reference to kings or kingdoms is well established in the OT (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 35:3; Dan. 2:35). This is evidenced by the start of v. 10 which states that the seven mountains are “seven kings.” As with most of Revelation, seven denotes a sense of completeness. The same is true here.
  + These are not seven literal kings but it is a description of the complete oppressive evil power of those in authority that stand in opposition to God and His people. That this is true is also seen from passages like 12:3; 13:1.
  + Beale states, *“…the seven mountains and kings represent the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God’s people when they do not submit to the evil state’s false claims”* (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*).
  + Any effort to draw a literal interpretation of the seven kings presents problematic issues. It would be strange for one to interpret seven here as literal when seven is used symbolically throughout the book.
  + There is no consensus among scholars, commentators and preachers as to which seven kings these are if in fact they are referring to seven literal kings. Others seek to apply this to seven kingdoms but that poses the same problems as well.
  + Because of these things it is best to interpret these verses the way it was intended: symbolically. That five are said to have fallen points to the reality that a handful have been destroyed by God because they opposed Him. The one “who is” is referring to the oppressive power of John’s day (likely Rome).
  + Another is yet to come (the seventh) and he will remain for a little while. This may be referring to future oppressive power that will stand against God and His people. The point of these verses is to show that all world powers whether past, present and future that stand against God will not last forever.
  + **Verse 11**– The beast is said to be the eighth but one of the seven and he goes to destruction. The idea is that he may try to distinguish himself from the seven kings but God is telling us he is just like them. He will fall short and he will be destroyed because he stands against God (cf. Psa. 2:9-12).
  + **Verses 12-13**– Having interpreted the seven heads of the beast, the angel now speaks about the ten horns. The imagery of these horns come from several passages in Daniel (Dan. 7:7-8, 20, 24). We also read of these horns in 12:3 and 13:1.
  + Like the previous verses, “ten kings” are not to be considered as ten literal kings but a symbol for a multiplicity of earthly rulers and world powers that attain to a state of full power. They work hand in hand with the beast. Therefore, these kings are probably to be likened to the “kings of the earth” (16:14, 16; 17:2; 18:3, 9: 19:19).
  + When they receive authority to act with the beast, it will not be for a long period of time. “One hour” also denotes the time period in which God will destroy Babylon the Great (18:10, 17, 19). God will ensure that this period of rule is brought to a quick end since He is the Sovereign King.
  + **Verse 14**– The allegiance of the heads and horns is so that they can wage war against the Lamb. Satan is picture after His defeat in chapter 12 in a state of desperation gathering others to help in his battle against God. In reality there is no battle because God will always win!
  + This gathering to fight against the Lamb was alluded to in 16:13-16 and will be further spoken of in 19:11-21. That the Lamb will conquer His enemies is evident from Dan. 7:11, 26-27. The Lamb is destined to win and conquer since He is the Sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords (cf. Deut. 10:17; Dan. 2:47; 1 Tim. 6:15).
  + The imagery of the Lamb defeating His enemies is also an answer to the arrogated question of 13:4. Unlike Satan, God cannot and will not lose. Those who are on His side will overcome (6:9-11; 12:11). These are those who are the called, chosen and faithful (cf. Eph. 1:3-14; 4:1; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).
  + **Verse 15**– The waters on which the woman sits represent all the peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues. Babylon’s success is dependent upon these who commit immorality with her via various forms of trade and religious practices.
  + These things allow Babylon to feel a false sense of security (cf. Jer. 51:13) which God will show to be nothing more than a farce in chapter 18. Babylon’s wretched end in the OT will prove to be the same for its NT counterpart.
  + **Verse 16**– The ten kings and the beast initially enjoy the intoxication of the harlot but they will soon turn against her to destroy her. This must be understood as the working out of God’s sovereign will in the defeat of His enemies. Ironically, they gather to defeat Him but they will end up destroying each other.
  + This recalls a host of OT passages that speak concerning similar things (Ezek. 16; 23; Nah. 3:4-5). Israel joined forces with the Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians only to have them all turn on her. Evil coalitions never lead to anything except destruction.
  + G.K. Beale does well in pointing out that the imagery here also reminds us of Jezebel in the OT (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*):
    - Jezebel is attractive (2 Kings 9:30); Harlot has attractive appearance (17:4)
    - Jezebel is queen (1 Kings 16:31); Harlot is queen (17:5)
    - Jezebel influences idol worship (2 Kings 9:22); Harlot does same (17:1-2, 5)
    - Jezebel seduces (1 Kings 21:25-26); Harlot seduces (17:2)
    - Jezebel seeks economic prosperity (1 Kings 21:1-16); Harlot also (18:11-19)
    - Jezebel persecutes God’s people (1 Kings 18:4; 19:2); Harlot also (17:6)
    - Jezebel does sorceries (2 Kings 9:22); Harlot does same (18:23)
    - God avenges blood of His people on Jezebel (2 Kings 9:7); Harlot (19:2)
    - God judges Jezebel quickly (2 Kings 9:33-35); Harlot (Rev. 18:10, 17, 19)
    - Faithful servants refuse to participate Jezebel (1 Kings 19:18); Harlot (17:14)
  + **Verse 17**– This verse shows that God is the source of their destruction. He wills that they should destroy each other to their eternal condemnation (cf. Ezek. 38:4-13; Zech. 14:2). This is further evidence that only God is truly in control (Rev. 4:2-3).
  + **Verse 18**– The woman is tied to the great city (Babylon the Great) which rules over the kings of the earth. As Jesus warned so often, mammon becomes the center of many peoples’ lives (Matt. 6:19-21; 24) and it will destroy them (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Material prosperity is not the purpose of life (cf. Ecc. 12:13). Some learn this the hard way.