

THE WOMAN AND THE BEAST

Revelation 17

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Revelation 17:1-18 (NIV)

“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. 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: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES 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 were 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 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 the 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.’”

Chapters 17 and 18 are directly tied with the sequence of judgments in Revelation 16 called the bowls of God’s wrath. In fact in Revelation 16 each bowl of wrath is handed out by a different angel so that as we open to 17:1 we find one of these angels who had handled the bowl of wrath, which is perhaps the seventh bowl of wrath, which had to do with Babylon, the fall of Babylon, Revelation 16:19. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the wine of the fury of His wrath.

Now as we approach Revelation 17 and 18 we have a kind of a thing, which can best be compared to showing a home movie. You’ve shown the whole reel and you say, “I’d like to see the last part in slow motion. So you back up the movie and show the last part in slow motion. Essentially what Revelation 17 and 18 are doing is showing us in slow motion sequence the seventh bowl of Revelation 16.

As in all of Revelation there are two ways we can look at Revelation. One way is to approach it through a predictive viewpoint and another way is to approach it through a devotional viewpoint.

I. For a moment I'd like to look at the predictive viewpoint of Revelation 17 by a figure of speech, which I will call the "calendarizing method."

The calendarizing method is simply you take Revelation 17, imagine a calendar from year of 90 A.D.—the approximate time of Revelation until now—and we try to say Revelation 17 fits at such and such a date. It's the equivalent of taking headlines and saying what Scripture supports the headlines that are in the papers this morning. That's the calendarizing method.

Revelation 17 is one of the most intriguing chapters in all of Revelation and is one of the most difficult. The calendarizers have had a field day in trying to figure out exactly where Revelation 17 fits on the calendar.

I'll review three calendarizing views of Revelation 17.

I'll spend some time with some historical views in the past because I think that can give us a caution in respect to how we treat modern calendarizing views. It sort of keeps our feet on the ground knowing that we're not the only people who have done the calendarizing number on the Book of Revelation.

The popular view of Revelation 17 is that Babylon represents the end-time world capital city during the period of Tribulation. It will be a city, which ultimately is administered or led by the Antichrist, who will turn against it. Babylon, in the modern sense, therefore, would be a city, which dominates the world's politics, commerce and religion, like the Babylon of old.

The first Babylon is first found in Genesis 11 where they tried to make a tower to heaven in order to figure out through astrology what the gods were like. The Book of Genesis makes a penetrating comment on the original Babel or Babylon. That is it was made of bricks rather than stone, which is God's way of poking fun at the whole system. It's saying "I make things out of stone; the best you can do is make them out of bricks. My stuff lasts longer." The city, which

presides over the world, is indeed a manmade system. It doesn't have the eternity or the strength as God does.

The beast here in Revelation 17, by the modern calendarizing view, would represent the Antichrist. Perhaps the most popular exposition of this would be, for example, a statement is made in Revelation 17 that there were five who were, one now is, and one is coming who will reign for a short time and then there will be an eighth which will come who will be of the seven. Persons take this and say that's easy to understand. The five who were are the worldwide empires that have existed on planet earth. They are these: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. The one that now is at the writing of Revelation was Rome. The one that is coming for a short time is the final kingdom that will embrace the whole world much like Rome did, at least the western world. This eighth one who comes will be the Antichrist himself.

As for the ten horns that is also easy to understand. From a modern calendarization point of view, the ten horns represent the ten nations of the common market. Nine of which currently exist. A tenth flagpole waits for a flag in Brussels, Belgium. Without making any comment on the validity or non-validity of that viewpoint that's a pretty popular view.

Let me take you back for a moment. When you take this data and try to fit it into the calendar the twentieth century is not the only century in which the facts of history seem to have fit the interpretation of Revelation 17. For example, during the time of the Reformation when the reformers almost to a man believed that the imagery of Revelation 17 represented the Roman Catholic Church as the woman or the harlot and that the papacy, the Pope, was represented by the beast. Rome, the city of seven hills, and the ecclesiastical power of Rome which was built like the Empire of Rome on seven hills the church was impressive like the woman of Revelation 17 with its power and its beauty. But in its golden cup, its sacramental cup, a perversion of grace

and all that is holy there was instead abomination to the Lord, and the church according to the Reformers required the blood of the saints. And indeed when we look at the time of the Reformation there was a great deal of blood-letting involved.

Matthew Henry, who is the great commentator of that period of time, after the reformation writing in 1706 talked about the five that were, the one that now is, the one who's coming for a short time, and the eighth who belongs to the seven. This is his view. Rome has been governed by seven kinds of governments. Rome was governed by kings, counsels, tribunes, dictators, emperors who were pagan and emperors who were Christian. Five of these were extinct when this prophecy was written, one was then in being, that is the Roman emperor who was a pagan. And the other the seventh, the Christian emperor was yet to come from the standpoint of Revelation 17. This beast, the papacy, makes an eighth governor and sets up idolatry again. The ten kings were princes and linked to the papacy to secure revenues backed by papal decrees. That was Matthew Henry's viewpoint and a popular reforming viewpoint.

The first century would have taken Revelation 17 and approached it from a different angle. The elements and the history in their day would also fit the puzzle of Revelation 17. If you would have talked to a first century Christian, he could have very easily told you what his opinion of what Revelation 17 was. Babylon in his viewpoint would have been Rome. He would have sufficient reason for this. For one thing, Babylon applied to Rome is done by Peter. "Those who are in Babylon, greet you," meaning the Roman Christians. In the Old Testament the literal Babylon is a city that is addressed by Jeremiah 51:13 as dwelling upon many waters. Actual historical Babylon, the river Euphrates ran through the center of a canal irrigation system that flooded and made possible agriculture in a valley. Therefore historical Babylon was called "seated upon many waters."

The Babylon of Revelation 17 is seated upon many waters but John tells us in verse 15 the waters aren't literal. The waters are people, languages, multitudes, which means it's a political empire. Rome in the first century was the political and commercial power of the world. It has certain characteristics, empirical characteristics: royal dress—purple—and extravagant wealth—its gold and precious jewels. It also had moral and spiritual corruption. Inside of its golden cup of power and beauty there were all kinds of abominations.

And on its head it had what a prostitute would have worn to identify herself with the name of the prostitute on the headband. The Christians understand what the real name of this Roman prostitute is, the place where the people of God are held in captivity. Christians were not the only people in the first century that thought Rome was morally corrupt. Seneca, another Roman writer, called Rome a filthy sewer. A Christian looking at this definition of Revelation 17 would further say here is a city identified with the persecution of the saints, drunk on the blood of the saints. If nothing else, the description in verse 9 of being located on seven hills geographically describes Rome. The beast, then, the Christians understood to be Caesar or the Antichrist over Rome who is full of blasphemous names. Emperors did wear blasphemous names. Augustus means “to be revered.” Some of the other emperors wore titles such as “divine.” Or “lord” or “savior”—titles of blasphemy against God. If we had been a calendarizer in the second century or the first we might have said John's view of this is very easy to understand.

Another viewpoint that perhaps would have more validity in the Early Church is the word “seven” instead of describing seven different governments or seven different sorts of empires is the numerical way that five-sevenths of the enemy's power is ended. The beast has not been really punished by the death of Christ. He's going to spring back to life and cause havoc for the

saints but unto ultimate defeat. Rome's days are numbered and the ten horns are simply those aligned with Rome who will ultimately turn against her from an early Christian perspective.

Why do I bother you with these other two views? Why not stay on what it means now? I want to simply say as Christians we ought to have both an attitude of possibility toward modern calendarizing views and always be expectant of the Lord's return but also have a certain kind of suspicion so that we're not set up for believing certain things are going to come to pass on the basis of evidence that really can't be supported in Scripture. There are people today for example that are saying the "Lord is coming by such-and-such a date." I say, "Praise the Lord! I do hope He comes but there's no warrant from the Scripture for that particular position and it very well may be that the Lord will not come by then. It may very well be that the ten horns are not the common market in spite of what some people are saying." I have thought what is going to happen if there are twelve nations instead of ten that join the European economic community. That is going to make a lot of books be rewritten.

Martin Luther was once asked, "If you knew the Lord was coming tomorrow what would you do today?" He responded, "I would plant a tree." How neat! If you knew the Lord was coming tomorrow that does not indicate that you should all of a sudden be panicky or frenzied. But that you would live life in an orderly way knowing that inasmuch as today is the day God has called us not to do as the Thessalonian Christians did and get all caught up in an eschatological mania that we quit work and quit doing the things God's called us to do and quit preparing for the future. But that we root ourselves down in the calling God has given to us recognizing that He can interrupt time if He so pleases.

II. I think Revelation 17 yields much more for us if we look at it from the timeless truths that are being communicated to the here and now, the everyday moments of life.

This book speaks to us with unerring authority.

Just the words “mystery Babylon” should catch our attention. There is a mystery of Babylon and he who has wisdom is called to understand it. “Babylon” is a term in Scripture representing a world that is against God. It’s another word for “the world” even. The values, the systems, the attempts of man to reach God on their own efforts without God’s aid or God’s revelation.

There’s a mystery to it we are being told.

This word enkindles in my mind a memory of what Jesus said in Matthew 13 where He said, “I will show you the mystery of the kingdom.” People in His day were looking for the kingdom to be something totally in the future when God would rule and reign over everything and there would be no enemies. But Jesus said “I’ll show you the mystery of the kingdom. It’s like a man going out to sow seed.” Jesus is saying the kingdom is not only something that is coming, the kingdom is something that is present in the lives of someone who will receive it. It’s already in the world. That’s what I think Revelation is saying about Babylon. It’s not just some political end-time emperor, although that I’m sure it is. But it’s already a spirit that is in the world. It’s like John in his letter about the Antichrist: He says the Antichrist is coming and yet is in the world now. For he who denies that Jesus has come in the flesh is of antichrist. So Babylon is not just something future. We don’t have to get out a prophecy book to understand Babylon in the future. Babylon is now, wherever there is a spirit which aligns itself against God and will have nothing to do with the Christ of Calvary and the Resurrection.

Babylon embraces more than Rome. It embraces more than an end-time empire. It lies near our own door.

How does it do this? I think one thing we can gain from Revelation is recognizing as we come to Babylon, the great prostitute of Revelation 17 that there are in the Book of Revelation two

THE WOMAN AND THE BEAST

Revelation 17

women which are put forward for our consideration. Revelation is saying to that, you belong to one or the other.

In Revelation 12, an earlier passage, we looked at the woman who was dressed with the sun, the moon, and the stars. She was in labor to bring forth a child. But the dragon waited to seize her child when she gave birth. She gave birth to a man child and the man child was caught up to God and His throne and the woman fled into the wilderness where she is to be staying until such time that the dragon is judged. When we were in Revelation 12, I indicated that this woman indicated spiritual Israel or it represents God's faithful throughout both the old age and the new age, all of those who are dressed with the dress of heaven.

The woman in Revelation 17, the great prostitute, is dressed with the dress of earth: scarlet and jewels and the like. But the woman of heaven has the sun, the moon and the stars for her dress, a heavenly dress. The people of God are people who are related to the one who is in heaven. In the people of God, there is the birth of the Christ child. The people of God may sometimes be hunted and forced to go to the wilderness. But when they're forced into the wilderness of persecution or loneliness or alienation from this world, there God sustains His people.

But not so the great harlot, the other woman we are told of. This woman obviously does not want a child. She does not have God as her father and she does not have Christ as her son in that sense. She does not claim Christ as son. She is a prostitute. She wants nothing to do with parental responsibility. She wants nothing to do with the child. She doesn't want the child. Sitting where she sits on the beach she looks exceedingly impressive. We are told that her garments are of scarlet. In the wilderness, John sees her clothed in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold, precious stones, and gems. John is astonished at what he sees, just like you would be if you'd never seen New York City and you were approaching the Atlantic and saw the Statue of Liberty

and the skyscrapers towering over New York City. If you had come from a primitive culture you would be astounded to see anything so magnificent. But if you drive down the streets of the city in some of its more terrible areas, some of that astonishment would soon give way to revulsion, as it would in any major city of the world.

John has this same kind of impression as he looks at Babylon. Initially it seems so very impressive. Beauty. But then there's a tip off. He's in the wilderness when he sees the beauty and it's in the wilderness that he notes she's clothed in purple and scarlet, the colors of royalty. But also the same colors of the dragon. Even though this woman is beautiful if you have spiritual perception you'll see just at the outset she's associated with the dragon, with the devil and with his false prophet and with the Antichrist. She's wealthy—precious stones and gold. There's nothing wrong with wealth. But as John looks at her from the wilderness he reckons, especially in chapter 18, how she got that wealth: By sacrificing morals and virtue for the sake of power and honor. She has a certain set of beliefs and lifestyle represented in the golden cup in her hand and the bowl of abominations. The golden cup—there's nothing wrong with that. But the point of Revelation is there's something in that cup that's full of abhorrence.

There are lots of things in life that look very beautiful from the exterior. But if you look further within they may be full of something, which is wrong. The word “freedom” can be a golden cup. But if freedom means freedom from responsibility, then inside the cup is all manner of abhorrence and evil. The phrase “women's rights” can be a beautiful powerful thing if it means an end to discrimination. But it can be a very abhorrent thing, if it is in the cup of abortion and lesbianism. The word “male rights” can be a right kind of thing or “human rights” can be the right kind of thing. But if inside the cup there is a perversion of human values, a perverting of sexual values one has to ask whether what is in the cup is abhorrence. Power and wealth of its

own right perhaps look impressive but one has to ask, what is inside the cup if it involves the trampling of human rights.

The world seems so powerful as compared to the church. This is John's point. The group of scattered Christian communities in Asia Minor to which he is writing seems so powerless. Not only powerless in terms of the world, they're rent by heresies from within. The world with its systems and its philosophies and its glittering personalities seems all-powerful against the puny pathetic body of Christ.

John says in verse 14 that Babylon wars on the saints. He uses the figure of speech "wars on the Lamb." Of course when you fight the Lamb you're really fighting the people of God who are identified with the Lamb, but in the end the Lamb triumphs.

John is able to see what Babylon really is when the Spirit gets him in the wilderness. It isn't in the midst of the everyday things of life that he sees it but it's backing off and looking from a distance, from the eyes of the Spirit that he's able to perceive the true values of life. I'd like to submit that there may be a lot of things you're not seeing in your life if you're not praying. It's possible to really miss priorities, miss things as God sees them, unless from, time to time, and not just every other year but on a regular basis we have those moments when we back off and let the Spirit of God suggest to us what his priorities are. And what perhaps in our life might give us better perspective on what we are doing or maybe not doing.

If this harlot in Revelation 17 weren't so hideous she would be pitiable. She sits on the beast, which is the Antichrist, but does not control it. And that's a significant principle. No doubt she thinks she's got everything under control. Rome certainly felt it had everything under control. But the fact is she doesn't have everything under control. She sits but she does not control. She has

THE WOMAN AND THE BEAST

Revelation 17

made the Faustian bargain of selling her soul to the devil, only without even realizing she had sold that soul, in the end not to be rescued by God but to reap bitter harvest.

I have experienced situations where I've discussed with people things they were doing which were clearly morally wrong from the Scripture. I've sometimes heard the refrain "I know what I'm doing. I've got everything under control." That's another way of saying, "I'm riding the beast."

I doubt that the woman of Revelation 17 was even aware of what she was riding, but ultimately the moral is true—whoever rides the beast ultimately gets thrown. Before God even judges the world's system, Satan himself turns against his own people and exposes, devours, and burns the prostitute of Revelation 17.

What an incredible moral. What a lesson. That he who rides evil will ultimately be overthrown by evil itself. There are so many contemporary illustrations to this. Satan doesn't care for his people, that's the message of Revelation 17. You commit yourself to him and he's not going to take care of you. He's going to ultimately turn against you. Whereas in Revelation 12, the other woman, the woman who is the people of God, she may have to go to the wilderness; she may know persecution; she too may know loneliness but she flies on the wings of an eagle. She's carried; she's sustained because God is faithful to his own. But the beast is not faithful. What he's done for the harlot of Revelation 17 is simply do a set up on her all the way. In the case of the harlot she started out knowing she was going to be deceived when she got on the beast. She winds up in the end thinking she was in control but at the end she was thrown off.

Remember when Satan faced Jesus in the wilderness, in the desert. Satan said to Jesus, in essence, "All this I'll give You, all the kingdoms of the world. I'll make you seated upon the waters, seated upon the nations. All this I'll give You if You'll bow down and worship me." Was

that a bona fide offer? I don't think it was. I think he would have given it to Him for a time. But if Jesus had gotten on the beast, gotten on the waters, ultimately the time would have come when the devil would have dumped Jesus.

One thing Satan finds it impossible to do is to be loyal. That's outside of his ability—loyalty and faithfulness. He will ultimately turn on all of those who identify with him. It's the endless story of his reign and record. He is truly a sick personality, the source of all psychological and mental illnesses is this sick personality.

But Jesus says "I will never leave you or forsake you. If you come with Me, you'll not be thrown off. I am with you always." God never leaves His people.

Closing Prayer

We acknowledge in these closing moments, our Heavenly Father, Your great love for us. Your abiding care. We thank You for the chance today in Your word to contrast Your personality and character with that of the enemy of our souls. We see again in sharp focus who it is that is for us and who it is that is against us. We pray, Lord Jesus, in very special way that You would touch hearts here today who have been in the wilderness for a little bit. A wilderness that for a moment the voice of the world is blocked out and through the proclamation of Your word and through prayer we can get a perspective on where we're at. We can, in the Spirit, look at the choices we are making, at the persons we are giving ourselves to or not giving ourselves to. We can have the mind of the Spirit, which sheds light upon our choices and causes us to see the hideousness that if we weren't praying might seem very beautiful and appealing and alluring to us. Lord, You're so faithful to us. We want to respond by being faithful to You. Thank You, Lord, that You care for Your own. There may be some in this service today that You just want to send a special word of encouragement. They are Your people but the world seems so strong against them. The

THE WOMAN AND THE BEAST
Revelation 17

monsters that they have faced in their own personal lives look so large against the seemingly slender thread of their faith, trust in You. You're speaking today to them, saying, "Do not be afraid. I am with You." You're reminding us that You who began a good work shall complete it. You will never leave us alone. You are with us. And we will through You and in You prevail. Thank You Lord for the triumph, which is ours because of Your resurrection and Your life. Through Jesus our Lord we give thanks and praise and glory forever. Amen.