

Desolation And Destruction! (Revelation 17—18)

Beginning in **Revelation 17**, John describes the lamb's step-by-step victory over "the beast" and his kingdom. In **Revelation 17**, the religious system is judged; in **Revelation 18**, the political and economic systems fall victim. Finally, the Lord Himself returns to earth; judges Satan, "the beast", and the false prophet (**Rev. 19:19-20**); and then establishes His Kingdom.

One reason John used symbolism was so that his message would encourage believers in any period of church history. The true church is a pure virgin (**Rev. 19:7-8**; see also **2 Cor. 11:2**), but the false religious system is a "harlot" who has abandoned the truth and prostituted herself for personal gain. In every age, there has been a "harlot" who has persecuted God's people and this will culminate in the last days in a worldwide apostate religious system.

Likewise, every age has featured a "Babylon," a political and economic system that has sought to control people's minds and destinies. Just as the contrast to the "harlot" is the pure bride, so the contrast to "Babylon" is the City of God, the New Jerusalem, the eternal home prepared for the Lamb's wife (**Rev. 21:9ff.**). Each generation of believers must keep itself pure from the pollution of both the "harlot" and "Babylon."

In these two chapters, John prophesies two divine judgments.

1. The Desolation Of The Harlot (Chapter 17)

The scene begins with an *invitation* (**Rev. 17:1-2**). One of the angels asks John to come and see what God will do with "the beast's" worldwide religious system. Four times in this chapter, the woman is called a "harlot" (**Rev. 17:1, 5, 15-16**), and her sin is called "fornication" (**Rev. 17:2, 4**). Her evil influence has extended to the whole world, reaching even into high places ("the kings of the earth").

- a. Following the invitation, John was carried away "in the Spirit" into the wilderness. There he saw "the harlot" and wrote down the *description* of what he saw (**Rev. 17:3-6**). **Genesis 2** speaks of a pure bride in a lovely garden, but by the Bible's end, civilization has degenerated to an impure harlot in a wilderness! That is what sin does to the world.
- b. The description is very full. The woman is dressed in expensive garments, decorated with gold and precious stones. She is holding a golden cup in her hand and is drunk with the blood of the saints. On her forehead (see **Rev. 13:16, 14:1**) she wears a special name.

- c. Her posture is important. She is seated upon “many waters” (**Rev. 17:1**), and upon a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. No wonder John was greatly astonished (**NIV**) when he beheld the woman and “the beast.”
- d. But what did it all mean? Thankfully, the angel gave John (and all believers) the *explanation* of these symbols (**Rev. 17:7-18**).
- e. Let’s begin with the *woman*. **Revelation 17:18** makes clear that she is identified with a city that existed in John’s day (“reigns” is present tense). This city is prosperous and powerful, but also idolatrous (“blasphemy”) and dangerous. For one thing, it pollutes the nations with its filth and abomination (pictured by the golden wine cup); for another, it persecutes those who belong to the Lord (**Rev. 17:6**). Power, wealth, pollution, persecution: These words summarize the “great harlot’s” involvement on a worldwide scale.

The woman’s name also involved “mystery” (**Rev. 17:5**). In the New testament, a “mystery” is a hidden truth that only the spiritual initiated can understand. To grasp one of God’s mysteries requires spiritual intelligence and discernment. In this case, the mystery has to do with Babylon.

The city of Babylon was founded by Nimrod (**Gen. 10:8-11**). The name *Bab-el* means “the gate of God.” Ironically, the famous tower of Babel (**Gen. 11:1-9**) was an idolatrous attempt by man to defy God. When the Lord sent judgment on the builders by making mankind’s one language into many, the world *bab-el* came to mean “confusion.”

Later in history, Babylon became a great empire before finally falling to Media-Persia. But from the beginning of Nimrod’s city in **Genesis 10**, an insidious anti-God “Babylonian influence” has been felt throughout history.

- f. The woman is “the great harlot,” but she is also “the mother of harlots.” The Babylonian system has, in one way or another, given birth to all false religions. She has also deduced men into opposing God and persecuting His servants.
- g. The seven mountains (**Rev. 17:9**) probably symbolize the city of Rome, built on seven hills. Certainly, in John’s day, the Roman Empire was living in luxury, spreading false religion, polluting the nations with its idolatry and sin, and persecuting the church.

John’s readers would not be surprised when he used an evil harlot to symbolize a wicked city or political system. God even called Jerusalem a harlot (**Isa. 1:21**). Isaiah said that Tyre was a harlot (**Isa. 23:16-17**), and Nahum used this same designation for Nineveh (**Nah. 3:4**).

As noted earlier, scarlet is the color of Satan (**Rev. 12:3**) and of sin (**Isa. 1:18**). Scarlet was a popular color in Rome, and both scarlet and purple were associated with rank and riches.

- h. But the woman must not be separated from “the beast” that carries her.

- i. “The beast” has seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads symbolize seven mountains (**Rev. 17:9**) and also seven kings or kingdoms (**Rev. 17:10**), in keeping with Old Testament imagery (**Ps. 30:7**; **Dan. 2:35**).
- i. According to **Revelation 17:10**, five of these kings (kingdoms) had passed off the scene, one was present in John’s day, and one was yet to come.
 - i. If so, then the *five past* kingdoms would be Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece.
 - ii. The *present* kingdom would be Rome, and the future kingdom would be that of “the beast.” In order to understand **Revelation 17:10-11**, we must consider **Revelation 17:12**.
- j. “The beast” not only has seven heads, but also ten horns, which represent ten kings. But these are very special kings: They enable “the beast” to rise to power and are even willing to yield their authority to him. But in the midst of the seven-year period, this ruler broke his covenant with Israel (**Dan. 9:27**) and began to persecute the people of God as well as the nation Israel.
- k. Energized by Satan and assisted by the false prophet, “the beast” became the world dictator and its god. In this way, “the beast” was both one of the seven [kings, kingdom]” but also the eighth. His kingdom was nothing but a revival of the Roman Empire (“one of the seven”), but it was a new kingdom (“the eighth”).

How does all of this relate to Babylon? The “Babylonian system” of false religion has been a part of history since Nimrod founded his empire. Scholars have discovered it is amazingly like the true Christian faith!

- a. Alas, it is Satan’s counterfeit of God’s truth. Babylonians practiced the worship of mother and child, and even believed in the death and resurrection of the son.
- b. Today, some believers see “the harlot” and the Babylonian system in an apostate “world-church” that minimizes doctrinal truth, rejects the authority of the Word, and tries to unite professed believers on some other basis than faith in Jesus Christ.
- c. However, in the day when John’s prophecy will be fulfilled, an amazing thing will happen: “The harlot” will be desolate by the very system that carried her! It is important to note that “*the beast*” carries “*the harlot*”. Satan (and the Antichrist) will use the apostate religious system to accomplish his own ends (i.e., attain world power), but then he will do away with “the harlot” and establish his own religious system.

Throughout history, political systems have “used” religious bodies to further their political causes. At the same time, church history reveals that religious groups have used politics to achieve their purposes. The marriage of church and state is not a happy one, and has often spawned children that have created serious problems. When dictators are friendly with religion, it is usually a sign that they want to make use of religion’s influence and then destroy it. The church of Jesus Christ has been most influential in the world when it has maintained a separated position.

Compare the description of “the harlot’s” desolation with that of the death of Jezebel (**2 Kings 9:30-37**).

Finally, note that those who trust the Lord are not influenced by “the harlot” or defeated by the kings (**Rev. 17:14**). Once again John points out that the true believers are the “overcomers.”

Satan’s counterfeit religion is subtle, requiring spiritual discernment to recognize. It was Paul’s great concern that the local churches he founded not be seduced away from their sincere devotion to Christ (**2 Cor. 11:1-4**). In every age, there is the tremendous pressure to conform to “popular religion,” and to abandon the fundamentals of the faith. In these last days, we all need to heed the admonition in **1 Timothy 4** and **2 Timothy 3** and remain true to our Lord.

2. The Destruction Of Babylon (Chapter 18)

Babylon was not only an ancient city and a powerful empire, but also the symbol of mankind’s rebellion against God. In **Revelation 18**, Babylon represents the world system of “the beast;” particularly in its economic and political aspects. At the same time, John calls Babylon a “city” at least eight times. Old Testament prophecy seems to make clear that the city itself will not be rebuilt (**Isa. 13:19-22; Jer. 51:24-26**). Some equate Babylon with Rome, particularly since “the harlot” and “the beast” cooperate during the first half of the tribulation. Perhaps Peter was using *Babylon* as a “code name” for Rome when he wrote his first letter (**1 Peter 5:13**).

John heard four voices and four important announcements.

- 1) **The voice of condemnation (vv. 1-3)**. This announcement was anticipated in **Revelation 14:8** (some commentators would also include **Rev. 16:19**, but this author has interpreted the “great city” in that context as Jerusalem).
 - a. There is a definite reference here to **Jeremiah 51—52**, where the prophet saw the fall of historical Babylon. But here John saw the destruction of spiritual Babylon, the world system organized by “the beast.” It was no ordinary angel that made this announcement, for he had great power and a glory that radiated throughout the whole earth. Despite Satan’s devices and the opposition of evil men, “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” (**Hab. 2:14**).

- b. The phrase “is fallen” not only adds dramatic effect to the announcement, but also suggests a dual judgment: ecclesiastical Babylon, “the harlot,” in **Revelation 17** and political Babylon here in **Revelation 18**.
- c. The church, the bride of the Lamb, is the habitation of God (**Eph. 2:22**); Babylon, on the other hand, is the habitation of Satan (**Rev. 18:2**). This parallels the judgment on ancient Babylon (**Isa. 13:21ff.**; **Jer. 51:37ff.**). Furthermore, John called the city “a cage of every unclean and hateful bird” (**Rev. 18:2**). In Christ’s parable of the sower, He also used birds as a picture of Satan (**Matt. 13:31-32**).
- d. This judgment has come because the Babylonian “system” has polluted the whole world. As in the judgment of “the harlot,” the sin is that of “fornication” or idolatry. The system intoxicated the people of the world with all the riches and pleasures it had to offer. It catered to those who were “lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (**2 Tim. 3:4**).

Christians of every age have had to heed the warning of **1 John 2:15-17**. How easy it is to become fascinated by the things the world has to offer. Like a person taking a sip of wine, we can soon find ourselves drinking deeply and then wanting more. The world system that opposes Christ has always been with us, and we must beware of its subtle influence.

The world system satisfies the desires of the earth-dwellers who follow “the beast” and reject the Lamb. But worldly things never permanently satisfy or last. The love of pleasures and possessions is but an insidious form of idolatry, demonic in its origin and destructive in its outcome.

2) The voice of separation (vv. 4-8). This admonition parallels **Jeremiah 50:8** and **51:6, 45**. In all ages, God’s true people have had to separate themselves from that which is worldly and anti-God. When God called Abraham, He ordered him to get out of his country (**Gen. 12:1**). God separated the Jewish nation from Egypt and warned the Israelites not to go back. The church today is commanded to separate itself from that which is ungodly (**Rom. 16:17-18**; **2 Cor. 6:14-7:1**).

- a. John offered two reasons for God’s people separating themselves from the diabolical system. The first is that they might avoid pollution, becoming “partakers of her sins” (**Rev. 18:4**). “Neither be partaker of other men’s sins” (**1 Tim. 5:22**). The word *partaker* means “joint fellowship or partnership.”
 - i. There is good partnership in the Lord (**Phil. 4:14**), but there is also an evil partnership that we must avoid (**Eph. 5:11**).
 - ii. True unity of the Spirit exists among believers, but we must not compromise by joining forces with that which is opposed to Christ.

- b. The second reason is that God's people might be spared the terrible plagues He will send on Babylon. God had patiently endured the growing sins of the evil system, but now the time had come for His wrath to be poured out.
- c. What specific sins would God judge? We have already noted Babylon's evil influence on the nations of the world, seducing them with *idolatry*. Another sin that will be judged is *pride*: "She hath glorified herself!" (**Rev. 18:7**). She saw herself as a queen who could never be dethroned, and this false confidence and pride could never be accepted by the Lord (see **Isa. 47** for the parallel, especially **vv. 7-9**).
- d. A third sin is Babylon's *worship of pleasures and luxury*. To "live deliciously" (**Rev. 18:7**) is to live proudly in luxury while others go without. It means to make possessions and pleasures the most important things in life and to ignore the needs of others. **1 John 2:16** summarizes this attitude.

God's people must not delay in separating themselves from this evil system, because God's judgment will come suddenly and Babylon will be destroyed in a single day. Sometimes God's judgments work silently "as a moth" (**Hos. 5:12**), but at other times they are "as a lion" (**Hos. 5:14**) and spring suddenly, and there is no escape. In one day, the entire economic empire will collapse! But those who have their citizenship in heaven will rejoice at the judgment of God.

3) The voice of lamentation (vv. 9-19). This long paragraph describes the mourning of the merchants as they see Babylon go up in smoke and all their wealth destroyed. The image here is that of a prosperous ancient city that is visited by many ships. The wealth of the city provides for many nations and employs many people. Not only do the merchants lament the fall of Babylon (**Rev. 18:11**) but also kings of the earth (**Rev. 18:9**). Business and government are so intertwined that what affects one affects the other.

- a. The city of Rome was the center for world trade and government in John's day, and it was known for its extravagance and luxury. Politically and economically, the people in the empire were dependent on Rome. Today, with the complex connections that exist between government and businesses, and with the interrelated computer systems, it would not take long for "Babylon" to collapse and the world's economic system to be destroyed.
- b. The word translated "wail" (**Rev. 18:9**) means "a loud lamentation" as opposed to silent weeping. In fact, the same word translated "weep" in **Revelation 18:11**. Note that the merchants are not feeling sorry for the city, but for themselves: They have lost valuable customers! God had brought them to the end of their life of luxury and wealth. Even their employees weep (**Rev. 18:17-18**).

- c. In **Revelation 18:12-13**, John gives a list of some of the commodities that brought wealth to these kings, merchants, and shipmasters. Last on the list is “slaves and the souls of men.” It has been estimated that one third of Rome’s population was enslaved, and it was not unusual for 10,000 human beings to be auctioned off *in one day* in the great slave market of the empire.
- d. John may not have been suggesting a return to slavery, but in a sense, persons are “bought and sold”(and even traded!) today. Athletic teams, and our great corporations more and more seek to control the lives of their officers and workers. As people become more enslaved to luxury, with more bills to pay, they find themselves unable to break loose from the “system.”

4) The voice of celebration (vv. 20-24). In contrast to the lament of the kings and merchants is the rejoicing of heaven’s inhabitants that Babylon has fallen. How important it is that God’s people look at events from God’s point of view. In fact, we are commanded to rejoice at the overthrow of Babylon, because in this judgment God will vindicate His servants who were martyred (see **Rev. 6:9-11**).

- a. Note the repeated refrain, “No more!” Jeremiah used a similar approach when he warned Judah of the nation’s coming judgment at the hands of the Babylonians (**Jer. 25:8-10**). Now that same judgment comes to Babylon herself! This description of Babylon’s losses indicates to us that both the luxuries *and* the necessities will be removed. Both music and manufacturing, work and weddings, will come to a violent end.
- b. **Revelation 18:24** should be compared with **Revelation 17:6** and **Matthew 23:35**. Satan has used religion and business to persecute and slay the people of God. During the first half of the tribulation, as “the beast” rises to power, ecclesiastical and political-economic Babylon will work together in opposing the Lord and His people.
 - i. It will seem that God does not care, but at the right time, the Lord will vindicate His people and destroy both “the harlot” and the great city.
 - ii. God is patient with His enemies, but when He does begin to work, He acts suddenly and thoroughly.
- c. We must not think that this voice of celebration calls us to be glad because sinners are judged. The fact of divine judgment ought always to break our hearts, knowing that lost sinners are condemned to eternal punishment.
- d. The joy in this section centers on God’s righteous judgment and the fact that justice has been done. It is easy for comfortable Bible students to discuss these things in their homes. If you and I were with John on Patmos, or with the suffering saints to

whom he wrote, we might have a different perspective. We must never cultivate personal revenge (**Rom. 12:17-21**), but we must rejoice at the righteous judgments of God.

At this point in our study, the political and economic system of “the beast” has at last been destroyed. All that remains is for Jesus Christ to come from heaven and personally meet and defeat “the beast” and his armies. This He will do, and then establish His righteous kingdom on earth.

But the important question is: “Are we citizens of ‘Babylon’ or citizens of heaven?”

Can you rejoice because your name is written in heaven? If not, then the time has come for you to trust Jesus Christ and “get out of Babylon” and into the family of God.

Homework: Read Revelation 19—20, The King And His Kingdom