

## Beware the Prostitute!

Revelation 17:1-18

*Studies in Revelation #24*

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**I** magine life as a fish. You live under water. You see under water. You breathe oxygen in the water. Your food comes from the water. All you know is water. Your whole life is water. Then you get taken out. What do you notice? Just how much your life was defined by water!

The world we live in is like water. And you and I are the fish. But when we come to Jesus Christ it's like we're taken out and shown just how much we depended on the water before. And one of the constant exhortations of Scripture to us is being aware that we get saturated by the world and that we need to repent of that saturation.

And so I want to begin at the end with the purpose of this highly symbolic passage for us. Jesus calls out to you and I today from this text to be on guard against the influence of the world in our lives. The world we live in is personified in Revelation 17 as an immoral woman. Like the “forbidden woman” of the Proverbs, the world whispers and entices with smooth words that seem to taste like honey, only to be sharp and bitter in the end (Prov. 5:3-4). You and I have to be on guard constant by the enticements of our consumer society. “If I only take on this one extra project and work from home after I leave work, I will get noticed, I will get a raise, I will get a promotion, I will be successful.” You and I have to be

on guard for how our patriotism shapes our worldview. “USA, USA, USA!” Is there any nation and people as cocky as we Americans?

So how does Jesus reveal this exhortation to us? He does so with a vision of **the judgment of the great prostitute** (v. 1) Babylon, which 14:8 and 16:19 foreshadowed.

1. *Her Identity*
2. *Her Influence*
3. *Her Inspiration*
4. *Her Invitation*

## Her Identity

What is the *identity* of this Babylon? It is called **the great prostitute** (v. 1), personifying it as a woman and this immediately reminds us of whom she isn't. She isn't the woman we saw in chapter 12, who gave birth to Jesus and who gave birth to us. Babylon isn't the church, which Paul calls “our mother”(Gal. 4:26).

To show this more, notice that here in chapters 17–19 before there was Lady Gaga there was Lady Babylon and she is contrasted with Lady Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, in chapter 21. And this is even shown in the literary way in which these two sections—chapters 17–19 and 21—each refer to **one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls** (17:1; 21:9) and each say this angel spoke to John, saying, **Come, I will show you** (17:2; 21:9).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On this antithesis, see Rainbow, *The Pith of the Apocalypse*, 34–35.

So Lady Babylon is in contrast to our spiritual mother, Lady Jerusalem, the church. And what is Babylon in Scripture? It is an enemy of God's people. Babylon was an enemy of God's people all the way back in Genesis 11 where a great civilization gathered to build a Tower of Babel, or Babylon, to reach heaven and make it's own name in opposition to God. Babylon was an enemy in the time that it assaulted God's people Israel and took them captive (e.g., Isa. 13-14; 21; 46-48; Jer. 25; 50-51; Ezek. 27; Dan. 2, 4:30; 7; Hab. 3).

What is *her identity*? Babylon is the fallen world in which we live that stands in opposition to God. We saw in chapter 13 two beasts—the beast from the sea that was symbolic of ungodly, persecuting government and the beast from the earth that was symbolic of idolatry and false worship. These two beasts are now brought together in this one image of Babylon—the world that we are in but not of, as Jesus says in John 17.

## **Her Influence**

“Well that's interesting, but I'm a Christian; I left the world and entered Christ's kingdom; I only listen to Christian music, read Christian books, and hang out with Christians.” If it were only that simple! Those of you who are teenagers know it's not this simple, don't you? You hear about movies and music that others mention and you feel embarrassed that you haven't heard of them; you hear others use words and they seem so cool so you are tempted to use the same words.

We have to live in the world God made and that we as sinners pollute. And a part of living in the world is recognizing the *influence* of the world on our lives. We see that influence as Lady Babylon is **seated on many waters** (v. 1). We've already seen from the Old Testament that the waters symbolize those who stand opposed to God and his people. And we even see that here in verse 15 as Jesus interprets for us that **the waters** are symbolic of **peoples and multitudes and nations and languages**. And again note verse 18 where we read that **the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth**. Her influence is worldwide. There is no square inch on earth where her influence is not felt and found. In the first century, this influence was over the world through the Roman Empire, of which John refers when we speaks of **the seven heads** of the beast being **seven mountains on which the woman is seated** (v. 9). Rome was the city that was known for sitting on seven hills (*urbs septicollis*), but since horns are symbolic of power, Rome was just the latest incarnation of this ungodly influence.

Let me illustrate with a current issue. Are you hot and bothered by world's agenda right now as it relates to marriage? "*That's the world's influence,*" you might be thinking. But are you not influenced by the world in your views and practices? Isn't divorce prevalent in the broader church in our culture? Why do we need good authors to write books on how to be a good husband and how to be a good wife? Because we don't have it all figured out just because we're Christians. How many of us men are influenced by pornography in our views of sex? How

many of you women think about love as novels, as reality TV, and as your favorite music on Jack FM have taught you? You and I are like fish. We don't even realize how saturated by the world we really are!

## **Her Inspiration**

Be aware, brothers and sisters! “But it’s just my favorite Sunday evening show; it’s just music; it’s just a little attitude I put on for show to have fun.” Here is where you need to dig deeper. We are not called by Christ to retreat into a cloister or monastery to get away from the influence of the world. We are called by Christ to be in the world but not of it; to be it’s light because the world is a dark place; and to recognize that behind all the world’s “boasted pomp and show”—as the hymn writer called it—is Satan.

Recognize the world’s *inspiration*: **And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns** (v. 3). Where have we read about a red beast? Earlier in 12:3 about the red dragon, the symbol of Satan. And where have we read about a beast with seven heads and ten horns? Earlier in 13:1 of the sea beast that led people to worship the dragon. The inspiration behind the world’s anti-Christ, anti-Christian agenda is Satan, that ancient foe of God and his people.

Recognize the world's *inspiration*. When the angel interprets the meaning of the beast in verses 7–8, he says, **The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction.** Where have we read this “was, is, and is to come” pattern? Earlier we read that this is true of Jesus, who died, who rose again, and who is alive forevermore in 1:17. And then we went on to read that this was, is, and is to come pattern is mimicked by Satan in his beast of persecuting power in 13:3.

The world is not neutral. It has an agenda. And it affects you whether you realize it or not like a fish in water.

## **Her Invitation**

And her influence over the world in general is also an *invitation* to you in particular. Look again at how Lady Babylon is described in verse 4: **The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.** What does this description make you think? That she is outwardly beautiful and alluring. She is a beautiful woman who is decked out in royal garb of purple. But also decked out in the garb of a prostitute, which scarlet dresses and golden jewelry symbolized (Jer. 4:30).

So attractive, in fact, that **with her the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual**

**immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk** (v. 2). Sexual immorality is not merely immorality, but it is also symbolic of idolatry because like a husband who cheats on his wife, when we serve our own interests because of the world's invitation to do so, we worship ourselves and not the Lord; and that's idolatry. I think after fifteen years as your pastor here I can safely say that the Devil is alive and well in the world and in our lives. He uses the world to allure us with the promise of money and success and so the world is more and more crowding out our Lord's Day with work. The Devil uses the world to seduce us with the things that bring us personal pleasure. You may not think this, but every time you take a vacation and don't worship, every time you skip church for a company event, a family event, an outing with a friend, or doing your favorite pastime, over time this chips away at your faith; it chips away at your relationship with Christ and his people. And so it just makes it that much easier to do it again the next time you are asked or are feeling selfish to skip public worship. Like the harlot of Proverbs, the world uses enticing speech, alluring adornment, and the seemingly fool proof plan that says you can have your fill at night and go on your merry way before anyone sees. The world is inviting you to experience it's treasures now; Christ in public worship is calling you to lay up treasures in heaven. Which will you prioritize?

## **Conclusion**

Are you sick of your sin? Are you disgusted with how weak your light is shining? Are you sorry for your lack of devotion to Christ because of the comforts of our culture? Then cry out, “Maranatha, come quickly Lord!” And we see that promise of the end of the world’s influence, inspiration, and invitation at the coming of our Lord: **and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings.** We see that promise to us who languish now in our struggles against the world: **and those with him are called chosen and faithful** (v. 14). And all of God’s people say, “Amen!”