

25

REVELATION 17

BABYLON IS RIPENING FOR GOD'S JUDGMENT

With Rev.17 we are entering into the last section of the Book of Revelation. At the end of John's vision in Rev. 16 the seventh angel poured out the last of the seven bowls of God's wrath. And then we heard in v.17 the loud voice of God Almighty, from the throne in heaven saying, *It Is Done!* God's wrath has been completed. God's Final Judgment is here.

Rev. 16:18–21 gives a brief summary of the events on Judgment Day. From here on we are given more detailed visions and explanations as to the events that are rapidly unfolding on that day. We will come to see the implications of this climax in the final chapters of Revelation. In chapters 17–20 we'll see the implications for God's enemies, the powers of evil, and in chapters 21–22 the implications for God's people, God's church.

The first part focusses on the fall, the destruction of Babylon. But this clean-up is not an isolated event. It also involves the destruction of Satan's helpers, the Beast and the False Prophet (19:11–21) and the destruction of Satan himself (20:7–10).

We are shown these things, as if they happen in chronological order, but in fact these are parallel events on the great day of God's judgment. This is also

the case with the rest of these chapters. We will see some flashbacks, but the events are all connected and come together, punishment and renewal.

This is how we will also meet two women in these chapters. They are introduced in an identical manner, but they are each other's opposite. In both cases, one of the seven angels of the seven bowls invites John. *Come, and I will show you*, he says (Rev.17:1 and 21:9). But what John sees is totally different. As a matter of fact, the contrast is stark and intentional. In Rev. 17 he sees an ugly prostitute, identified as the city of Babylon, and in Rev.21 he sees the lovely Bride of Christ, identified as the New Jerusalem.

So here is the choice you and I have to make, knowing that the day of God's Final Judgment can be here anytime: Do we follow Jesus Christ to the new Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, portrayed as the Bride of Christ. Or do we settle down in Babylon, portrayed as an immoral prostitute?

What John sees and hears in Rev. 17 shows us Babylon's true colours, as well as her final destination. Do not make a mistake here.

BABYLON'S TRUE NATURE

To help us understand what is happening in the eruption of events on the great day of God's final judgment, John is given an interpretive guide. It is one of the seven angels that were involved with the terrible judgments in Rev. 16, when the seven bowls of God's wrath were poured out. This tells us already that in this chapter (and the next) we are having a closer look at what is happening on the Day of Judgment, in this case it is about the great city of Babylon falling apart.

Come, he says, *I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute, who is seated on many waters*. We find out, though, that the actual punishment comes only at the very end of this chapter, and in more detail in Rev. 18.

We are going to see first how well-deserved this punishment is. We are going to see first how the world is getting ripe and ready for God's wrath.

Carried by the power of the Holy Spirit, John is transferred *into a wilderness*, a desert. In Revelation the wilderness, or desert is either a sanctuary

that provides safety (as in Rev. 12), or it is a desolate wasteland, where life is impossible. That is the case here.

What are we seeing, through John's eyes, in this desert? It is kind of unique, in the sense that we do not see or hear much action in this vision. What the apostle describes is a pretty static picture, like a painting, or a sculpture.

He sees *a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns*. We will hear more about this woman and this beast but note now already that this "desert-setting" signals what is coming. It symbolizes that her destruction is unavoidable. She is called "Babylon" and we will hear more about that, but whatever "Babylon" stands for, it will be laid waste and will come to nothing. This comes back in Rev. 18:2, where Babylon becomes a habitat of frightening desert creatures. So, yes, the desert is a fitting backdrop here.

But let us take a closer look. By now this beast is an old acquaintance of ours. You recognize him, do you not? Indeed, it is the beast from the sea that we met for the first time in Rev. 13. With his bright red colour, his seven heads and ten horns, he is the spitting image of his boss, Satan. His numerous blasphemous names show that he hates God. And he represents the political powers that hate God's church.

But this woman is new for us. We have heard her name, but we have not met her before. It is clear that the woman and the beast enjoy close cooperation. They are very much in tune with each other. That tells you already something about her.

Next the apostle gives a vivid picture of what she looks like. He describes her flashy, super-expensive outfit of purple and scarlet. In the ancient Near East only the very wealthy could afford such clothes. And then we see her excessive adornment with gold, jewels, and pearls; the way she shows off is really over the top.

Her brazen self-presentation, which is meant to impress and seduce people, radiates an obscene and devilish spirit. All this reflects her true nature as a prostitute. She combines the lure of sexual pleasure with the lure of wealth and luxury. "Come to me," she says, "I will make you happy and all your dreams will come true." According to v.2 many political leaders and numer-

ous other folks in the world have been deeply influenced by the immoral ideas and practices of this prostitute.

There is some offensive language here. The metaphor in this passage is controlled by porn-words. But it is symbolic, and so this is not only about sexual relations. Think of Old Testament prophets like Hosea, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. They used images of immoral sexual behaviour to picture the seriousness of Israel's religious, social, political, and cultural mix-up with the pagans in those days.

In other words, in Rev. 17, sexual boundary-crossing is a metaphor for accommodating to the antichristian culture, and indulging in its idolatry, its quasi-religious activities, evil desires, luxuries and sensual pleasures.

And let us be alert! This antichristian culture can present itself as impressive and attractive. The woman holds a golden cup in her hand and when the outside looks so beautiful, surely, the content must be delightful. A precious goblet with fine wine, presented with the promise that what she is offering will make the world a much happier place.

But if you trust her, the consequences will be the opposite. What is inside her cup is just horrible, disgusting, and poisonous. It is what the angel called *the wine of her sexual immorality* (v.2). When you drink from it, you will be polluted with the abominable filth of her immorality, her perverse idolatrous practices and selfish evils that lure you away from God. It will poison you and eventually kill you.

Who is this woman? Where do we place her in the whole context of Revelation? John then tells us what it says on her forehead: *Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes, and of the abominations of the earth.*

It is called “a mystery” because it needs an explanation.

The woman is identified as “Babylon”, as the angel puts it in v.18, *the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.* But what does the name “Babylon” tell us? The first Babylon was the city of the tower (Genesis 11). The second Babylon was the great city of king Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:1-21; Daniel 1 and 4:29, 30). Do you recognize the principle of hostile rebellion against the Holy God that wants to control the whole world? This

is the Babylon-principle that pops up throughout our history, also today, in different forms and shapes.

We have heard the name “Babylon” before, in Revelation 14:8 and 16:19, but that was almost in passing. Here we find out what “Babylon” stands for.

It is the strong and influential antichristian culture, with its promiscuous and adulterous lifestyle. It is the power that lures people away from God and Jesus Christ by controlling their moral choices. “Babylon” stands for everything God hates in this world, the arrogant idolatry, and the aggression against his church, which provokes him to anger. It is the place of the ultimate concentration of depravity.

All this makes Babylon the very opposite of the other city we will see appear in this part of the book, the New Jerusalem, just as the great prostitute is the very opposite of the other woman, the glorious and lovely bride of Christ.

But, yes, at first sight Babylon may look impressive and attractive. She promises wealth, luxuries, satisfaction, sexual pleasure, a fulfilled life, and happiness, and all of this without God. And many people who do not care about worshipping God will tell you that this is exactly why Babylon is such a fun place to live.

For John's first readers the city of Rome was the source of those evil attractions. But this culture of idolatry, greed, materialism, selfishness, and immorality was and is everywhere. Our modern society with its focus on material wealth, sexual freedom, tolerance for false religions, and a fun-filled, selfish lifestyle is Babylon today.

Advertisements and the entertainment industry teach us that you will only find satisfaction and meaningful living if you have enough money, fun and sensual pleasures.

And just in case we Christians think that this Babylon is all out there, in the bad world, it is good to remember that little Babylons operate also in our own hearts. The beast controls his followers by fear, and the prostitute seduces people by playing on their desires.

Well then, the sinful tendencies in our hearts as God's children also involve fear and desire. Why do we compromise with sin? Because we fear. We are afraid of suffering. We are afraid of being ridiculed or rejected.

We also compromise with sin because of the desires of our heart. Things like sex, wealth, fame, power, health, beauty, and you name it, are not all bad in themselves. But these can all become objects of our desires, our idols.

Babylon is the city where we all dwell, as we travel to the Promised Land. But as you make your way through it, make sure that you travel with your eyes wide open, and that you recognize the true nature of Babylon, the great prostitute, the mother, the origin of all immorality. Guard your heart. The consequences of associating with her are deadly. If she cannot seduce you, she will kill you.

John noticed that too. He saw this woman *drunk with the blood of the saints, the martyrs of Jesus*, the folks who refuse her enticing invitations, because of their faith in Jesus. The image of "drinking blood till you're drunk with blood" stands for enjoying killing without restraint. Babylon, the prostitute hates those who proclaim Jesus as the only Saviour, and who call all people to worship the living God. She revels in their violent persecution.

When you see the moral character of this woman, the true nature of Babylon, it is clear that she is ripe for God's punishment. Under the attractive and tolerant veneer hides a deeply rooted hatred towards God and his church.

The whole picture leaves John astonished. His first reaction is, "Wow...!" It almost sounds as if even the apostle John has to steel himself against the intoxicating draught that wafts from the cup that the prostitute holds.

BABYLON'S DECEPTIVE STRENGTH

Apparently the angel can see on John's face how stunned, how perplexed he is, perhaps even somewhat confused, such evil showing such grandeur. And he reacts right away in v.7. *Why do you marvel, why are you so astonished?* the angel says. But he does not wait for an answer. Immediately he continues. There is need to clarify what John is seeing in this vision.

As we have seen more often in Revelation, seeing alone can be insufficient or confusing. Appearances can be deceptive. That is why John needs the interpretive words of his guide to clarify what he sees. The angel says it several times: “what you saw... is”, or: “what you saw... are”.

Look at this powerful beast the woman sits on. We have recognized it already as one of the awful animals from Rev. 13, the evil, antichristian political power that claims to run the world. He seems to give the woman strong support for her promise to provide pleasure, wealth, and happiness without God. With arrogant pride she rides this monster, sitting on it as a queen on a throne, like God sits on his throne.

The antichristian cultural power of the great city not only controls, but is also carried by the antichristian political and economic power of the beast. They get along so well and rely on each other's strength. This evil duo seems invincible.

“However, when you look at it *with a mind with wisdom*,” says the angel in v.9, “you will recognize how deceiving this whole impressive picture really is. You will find out how deceptive the strength is that this beast gives to the woman. And thus, how deceptive the strength of this woman is”.

Such a *mind with wisdom* is a mind that relies on God's wisdom, the wisdom we get in the view from above, from heaven. Yes, the strength of this antichristian beast may look impressive from here, from below. But from above you can see that it *once was, now is not, and will come up*. The angel mentions it three times. Two times in v.8 and once in v.11.

That sounds remarkably similar to what Revelation also mentions three times as characteristic of our Holy and Almighty God, that he is the God *who is, was and is to come* (Rev.1:4,8; 4:8). Similar indeed, but at the same time so different. It exposes the beast at once as a counterfeit God. With his divine pretensions he tries to mimic God's eternal sovereign power. But he makes a poor copy. All the time this beast is trying hard to be like the eternal God, but it will never work.

Just as in Rev. 13, *the dwellers on earth* are astonished when they see the beast. He used to be strong (*he once was...*), then he was defeated through Jesus death and resurrection (*he is not....*), but his strength seems to come

back (*he will come up again...*). They marvel at its resilience. But that is because they do not have a *mind with wisdom*. “Dwellers on earth” is used ten times in Revelation, and is a standard expression for people that don’t believe in the living God and reject Jesus.

“But do not be deceived”, the angel says to us. Look from above. Do you see the contrast? Jesus Christ died, but he rose again and will come in glory. He is coming from heaven to establish an eternal kingdom.

And this evil, antichristian monster? Oh, he looks strong. But do not be intimidated, he is coming from below, from hell, and he is destined for destruction. The antichristian political power the prostitute relies on for her seductive programs will not help her to escape God’s judgment.

What about the seven heads of this ugly monster? That sounds pretty powerful and frightening. But again, here too his power is deceptive.

Interestingly, John’s interpretive guide gives two different explanations. These heads represent seven hills on which the woman sits (v.9), but they also refer to seven kings (v.10), he says. So we have two metaphors to describe the same feature of the beast.

Many scholars have come up with an enormous variety of literal interpretations as to what these seven hills stand for and who these seven kings are. There are just too many options to pick from, and the one is as good or as bad as the other. All together it becomes highly speculative, and often confusing.

It seems more fitting to take these things symbolically. And since both metaphors say something about the same feature (the seven heads), it makes sense that both symbolize the same thing. As always, the number seven stands for completeness. It is all about the claim of this beast to have absolute authority and invincible strength. But we learn to look at this from two different angles.

When the prostitute Babylon sits on seven mountains, it emphasizes that the evil power she relies on, appears to be as solid, strong, stable and immovable as mountains. That sounds discouraging for God’s people that live in the midst of this Babylonian culture.

But again, this strength is deceptive. There is also the image of those seven kings, of which five are gone, one is now, and one is yet to come. And that picture is full of encouragement for Christian believers in this world.

No matter how solid, stable, and never-ending it looks like, the antichristian political power, driven by Satan, is coming to an end; five of the seven kings are gone already. And the fact that the last of these kings will only be around for a short time, reinforces the good news that evil will not last, but that the end is near.

But what about this beast itself as an eighth king? Well, when the complete number of seven has failed, the number eight suggests a new beginning, with new hope that the antichristian power will be able to remain in control in this world. After all, this is the monster that makes the astonishing comeback, remember? (Rev.13:3) A frightening perspective!

But do not worry. God's fierce enemy will fail miserably. Since he belongs to the seven, he will face the same future as the others. He will not escape his destruction. Indeed, from whichever angle you look at it, this woman and her beast are ripening for God's judgment, and Jesus is going to win!

This comes out again in the last detail of the beast's appearance, the ten horns. What do we make of that? We hear that these ten horns represent ten kings, who are going to operate in this world all at the same time. Again, scholars have come up with various explanations as to who these kings are or what they stand for. But here again, let us forget confusing speculations, and focus on the symbolic meaning.

Under the image of a powerful political and military coalition we see the total of all earthly opposition to God Almighty coming together. They join forces under God's fiercest enemy, the monstrous beast we have seen before, as "commander-in-chief". Their power will not last long, but long enough to launch a massive attack on the Lamb Jesus Christ and his church. However, it will not get them anywhere.

Satan pulls out all the stops in a violent outburst of hatred towards Jesus Christ. But even the strength of all these hostile powers combined is deceptive. The war they start is futile. Jesus' superior power as Lord of lords and King of kings defeats them easily. Rev. 16:14-16 alluded to this already.

And we will hear more details about this great battle and victory in Rev. 19:11–21.

According to v.14 Jesus' faithful followers will share in his victory. This makes it an urgent question for everyone. Where are you in this battle? Do not be mistaken. In this spiritual war there is no neutral position, no sitting on the fence. You are either with the Lamb or with the beast.

Are you afraid for the strength of the beast, sometimes? Do not be deceived, he is ripening for God's judgment and his ruin is unavoidable. Remain faithful to the Lamb Jesus Christ when the final battle rages in your struggle of faith, every day.

BABYLON'S SURPRISING END

Backed up by the seemingly impressive strength of the beast she rides, Babylon the great, the prostitute, enjoys her worldwide corrupting influence (v.15). With her immorality and depravity, she infects and intoxicates people everywhere in this world *peoples and multitudes and nations and languages*.

We see it all around us. The world as the centre of political persecution (= the beast) and the world as the centre of the antichristian culture (= the prostitute) seem to make a strong and successful couple, unified in their hatred and opposition toward God and his church.

But, as we saw, her strength is deceptive, because the power that supports her is on its way to destruction. It makes for a pathetic picture.

In the v.16 and 17 the angel who has been talking to John, shows us from above, how unreliable the whole set up actually is. This evil, antichristian cultural power, this impressive prostitute, she will find her end, because she can no longer rely on the strength and support of her political counterpart, the beast.

In the beginning we saw the woman sitting on the beast, self-confident, proud, triumphant. But in the end it throws her off, turns around, and attacks her.

It is a surprising turn of events. The beast and his ten horns, the collective political, antichristian opposition here on earth against Almighty God, turns against Babylon, against the prostitute, against the antichristian culture in this world. They hate her, because her immoral, evil influence did not bring the happiness she promised. In the end the world without God is not going to be a better place. The pleasures of sin leave people empty, miserable, angry and frustrated.

The final scene of this chapter is full of graphically violent images. They will ruin her and rip away her expensive clothes, her gold and jewelry. They will strip her naked leaving her with no dignity whatsoever. It is a striking image of the completely impoverished, deeply embarrassing and shameful end of a culture without God.

It also says that *they will devour her flesh*, a barbaric demonstration of bitter and deeply rooted loathing. It reflects the horrible feast in Rev. 19:17,18 & 21 when scavenging birds gorge themselves on the flesh of God's enemies.

And then *they will burn her up with fire*. In the end there will be nothing left of the proud and brazen prostitute, absolutely nothing. When the sinful, immoral human culture in this world is ripe for God's judgment, it will face complete annihilation.

The violent language and gruesome images are unsettling. And yet, it is the Holy God who shows John the reality of the destruction of all evil and wickedness.

Here is the judgment the angel told John he was going to see (v.1).

Today Babylon seems so powerful and so influential. It is scary. But she is ripening for destruction. That tells you, "don't be scared". It also tells you how foolish it is to compromise with the sinful world, with the dominant antichristian culture. It will all come to nothing. God's judgment will deal with it and nothing will be left.

Yes, God fulfils his plans. The course of history has no surprises for him. He knows the end from the beginning. He is the power behind Babylon's destruction. But the surprise is that God uses her own allies as tools in his hands (v.17). The end of this vision shows us the self-destructive nature of evil.

Indeed, all evil and injustice carry within themselves the seed of self-destruction. And therefore, when God gives room to the powers of evil, do not be discouraged. The seed will grow and ultimately the whole edifice crumbles and comes tumbling down.

Trust that in the end it is all God's work. Know that he is firmly in control. When his enemies work out their own plans, they accomplish his purpose, until every word of him has been fulfilled, and the victory of his grace in Jesus Christ will make all things new.

Chapter 23 – Revelation 15

1. In God's judgments, God's wrath, God answers the prayers of the martyrs (Rev. 6:9-11; Rev. 8:1-5) and the saints/believers for vengeance upon his enemies and upon those who persecute the church. How does Rev. 15 assure us that God is fair when he does this?
2. What is the different perspective between the seven seals and the seven trumpets on the one hand, and the seven bowls on the other hand?
3. How can you sing about God's wrath (as in Rev.15)?
4. Many Christians like to have Bible texts on the walls in their homes that speak about God's love and grace. But there is more to say about God. What does the song in Rev. 15:3-4 teach us about God?

Chapter 24 – Revelation 16

1. How do you defend your faith as a Christian, when you hear people say: 'How can you believe in a God who controls everything and who allows all the suffering and misery in the world to go on? For me that's evidence that there is no God!'
2. In what is called "the battle of Armageddon" the Christian church is facing the hostile power of Satan. This can be in the form of violent persecution, but your faith can also be under attack in a much more subtle way. Have you read C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*? What should Christians watch out for?
3. The plagues in Egypt, described in Exodus 7 – 11, are in many ways similar to the plagues we hear about in Revelation. What is the connection?
4. How should we apply/put into practice what the glorified Christ urges Christian believers to do in Rev. 16:15? Look at Matthew 25:1-13; 1 Timothy 4:7b-8; Titus 2:11-13.

Chapter 25 – Revelation 17

1. The name Babel or Babylon we know from Genesis 11 and from Daniel 4. But the name is mentioned more often in the Bible, especially by the prophets. Consult a concordance to find out where.

How do these references help you to understand the symbolism of the use of this name in Revelation 17?

2. In this chapter Babylon is seen as the influential antichristian culture that lures people away from God and from Jesus Christ by controlling their moral choices. Discuss examples of how today's culture will try to do this.
3. Some see the woman or Babylon as a religious power, the apostate church that persecutes (or supports persecution of) the faithful church. There is an element of truth in this. Why?
4. What does it mean when this chapter wants us to remember that "little Babylons" operate also in our own heart?

Chapter 26 – Revelation 18

1. In v.4 the voice from heaven urgently calls the believers: *Come out of Babylon, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues*. What does this mean for Christian believers today, and how do you put this into practice?
2. Someone summarized the intention of v.4 in this way: "The church is in the world, but the world must never be in the church." Explain this statement.
3. How does Rev.18, so full of wrath, revenge, and destruction fit with the Christian message of love and forgiveness? How does v.20 fit here? Does it mean that Christians are called to malicious pleasure at the misfortunes of unbelievers?
4. Read Ezekiel 27 and 28. In Ezekiel's time Tyre was a wealthy and powerful city that was hostile towards Israel. What are aspects of the lament and prophecy Tyre that come back in Rev.18?

Chapter 27 – Revelation 19:1-10

1. Would those who live in heavenly glory with Christ be aware of the terrible fate of the wicked? And if that is the case, how can they rejoice when they see the horrors of God's judgments (v.3 and Rev. 18:20)? What is the key expression in this connection (v.2)?
2. We can have a hard time with the idea that heaven rejoices when God's wrath destroys the world. What does that tell us about our-