

The Beast in Babylon

Revelation 17:1-18

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Pastor Chad works hard each week to find worship songs that support the theme of the sermon. Sometimes this is easy to do and other times, it's more of a challenge. It was no doubt difficult to find songs for our topic today, "The Beast in Babylon." As we talked through various ideas, Chad remembered an old Christian rock song from 1989 by Whiteheart called "*Bye Bye Babylon.*" We chose not to sing it for various reasons, but the lyrics capture something striking as the song imagines walking through ancient Babylon with all its gold and glitter along with its strength and security. The lyrics extol ancient Babylon as impressive, desirable, and unrivaled.

The song does a good job summarizing Revelation 17-18: *No matter how high Babylon builds or how loudly she brags, she will eventually be broken.* One line sums it up perfectly: "*Bye, bye, Babylon...this moment to pride is gone.*" As we will see today, every human system that exalts itself above God will collapse under the weight of its own pride.

This chapter reveals the seductive power and ultimate downfall of the world's rebellion against God by calling us to discernment, purity and unwavering loyalty to the Lamb.

When I first outlined our Revelation Unveiled series and saw two whole chapters dedicated to Babylon, I asked myself two questions. The first was this, "*How am I going to preach two entire sermons on Babylon?*" My second question followed quickly, "*How can I get Pastor Ray to come back and preach for me?*" After studying Revelation 17 all week, I'm still not certain I totally understand everything in this chapter.

I did learn that Babylon is one of the most frequently mentioned cities in the Bible, with its name appearing more than 280 times. Beginning with the building of the Tower of Babel, which suggests confusion, this name was applied to the city of Babylon on the Euphrates River in modern-day Iraq. Babylon was later the capital of the mighty and malevolent Babylonian empire that destroyed Jerusalem and carried the southern tribes into captivity in 586 B.C. If you visited the site today, you would see mostly ruins. Saddam Hussein attempted to rebuild portions of ancient Babylon, but that project was never finished.

But Babylon was not merely an ancient city. In Scripture, it represents the seductive power of a satanic world system that promises everything but ultimately delivers nothing. Babylon embodies the glittering alternative to God, a spiritual counterfeit that lures the hearts of humans with luxury, security, sexuality, and prestige. It dazzles, deceives, and ultimately destroys.

Here are a few other observations.

- **Babylon seems to be symbolic of Rome.** Christians often utilized the name “Babylon” as a code name for “Rome,” the dominant world power at that time.
- **It appears that the city of Babylon will somehow be rebuilt during the Tribulation.** While faithful interpreters debate this, its prominence and catastrophic destruction in Revelation 17-18 suggest that Babylon will once again play a significant role in the end times (Isaiah 13-14; Jeremiah 50-51).
- **Revelation is a tale of two cities.** After the city of Babylon collapses in Revelation 17-18, we will see the celestial city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from Heaven in chapters 21-22. One city signifies humanity’s rebellion against God; the other represents God’s eternal dwelling with His redeemed people. Someone said it well: *“Babylon shows us what happens when humanity builds a world without God. The New Jerusalem shows us what God builds for His people forever.”*

I came across a helpful outline which captures the flow of Revelation 17.

1. **The seduction of the world** (17:1-6).
2. **The shattering of human empires** (17:7-13, 15-16).
3. **The sovereignty of God** (17:14, 17-18).

Here’s the main idea in a sentence: *Every human empire and worldly system that exalts itself in pride will eventually collapse from within and ultimately yield to the absolute sovereignty of the Lamb.*

1. The seduction of the world. Listen to verses 1-2: *“Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.’”* This connects the judgment of the great prostitute with the seven bowl judgments. The word

“prostitute” is a metaphor for false religion, moral corruption, political idolatry, economic temptation, and spiritual apostasy. Most commentators believe the prostitute is Rome, which stands for a dominant world system based on seduction and power.

The phrase, **“seated on many waters”** is interpreted for us in verse 15 where it refers to **“peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.”** All the **“dwellers on earth”** will become intoxicated by this false religious system allied with the beast. Similar to someone who is lured into sexual immorality or inebriated with alcohol, people will be unable to think clearly. This will cause unbelievers to be deceived, seduced, and swept up in the intoxicating influence of rampant idolatry.

I was helped by the explanatory note from the ESV Study Bible on this verse: *“Sexual immorality and spiritual infidelity are interlinked...the former often symbolizes the latter. Babylon’s wanton beauty intoxicates both heart and body.”* To say it another way, what we do with our bodies affects our souls. When we are involved in any kind of immorality, it will eventually affect us physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Psalm 32:3-4 says when David kept quiet about his sin by keeping it secret, it did damage to his soul, psyche, and strength: **“For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”**

Babylon promises pleasure, freedom, and satisfaction, but sin always takes more than it gives. What looks beautiful on the outside can leave us spiritually broken on the inside. That’s why we must not only resist Babylon’s seduction; we’re to bring our sin into the light and confess it to God.

In verses 3-4, John describes what happened next: **“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. 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.”** Purple and scarlet signify the luxury and splendor of ancient Rome. This woman was sitting on a scarlet beast, whose description reminds us of the great red dragon in Revelation 12:3. The connection is intentional: both are associated with Satan’s opposition to God. The word translated **“beast”** refers to a wild and savage creature, emphasizing his destructive nature.

The phrase ***“full of blasphemous names”*** means, *“to be stuffed or filled completely”* with blasphemous titles and slander against God. This may be a reference to the titles Roman emperors employed to claim deity, while also pointing to the Antichrist, who will exalt himself above God. The ***“ten horns”*** are not left for us to guess about. Verse 12 interprets them: ***“the ten horns that you saw are ten kings.”*** This also connects with Daniel 7:20, where Daniel saw ten horns representing ten kings

Outwardly, this woman who exemplified false religion, was dressed in beautiful clothes representing royalty and adorned with gold, jewels, and precious pearls. But inwardly, she was filled with foul ***“abominations”*** and putrid sin. I think of what Jesus said in Luke 16:15: ***“For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”***

Jesus exposed this exact same spiritual reality in Matthew 23:25 when He confronted the religious leaders: ***“For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”*** That’s the deception of Babylon: seductive on the outside, but sinful on the inside. Sin rarely arrives looking ugly or dangerous. It comes packaged in a sparkling golden cup. It masks its true corruption behind glamour, thrill, or promises of security.

Proverbs 5:3-5 provides a graphic warning against the dangers of sexual immorality which often comes in the form of a tantalizing temptation: ***“For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol.”***

If you’re struggling with temptation, ask God to make you nauseated by the very thought of sin. I remember trying my first cigarette when I was a teenager underneath a bridge on the Rock River in Watertown, Wisconsin. When I was about halfway through, I started vomiting. My buddy, on the other hand, loved his lemon twist cigarette and became a smoker from that day forward. Someone captured it well: *“Babylon wants us to focus on the gold of the cup, so we never look at the poison inside it. Holiness begins when God opens our eyes to see sin not as a forbidden pleasure, but as a vile abomination that cost the Lamb His life.”*

Verses 5-6 reveal more about the true nature of this woman, who represents the world system: ***“And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.’ And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.***

When I saw her, I marveled greatly.” It was customary for a Roman prostitute to wear a headband bearing her name. Here the word **“mystery”** is used to convey something hidden, like a cryptogram.

Loved ones, be on your guard so you are not seduced by the world. One pastor writes: *“Today, the greatest challenge facing American Christians is not persecution from the world, but seduction by the world.”*

One of the best ways to battle against the seduction of the world is to become a joyful giver. The Bible refers to money as a rival master in Matthew 6:24: ***“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”*** The word **“money”** also known as mammon in the ancient world, referred to an idol, a false god that promised security, identity, and power. It still does.

Every time we give, we make a declaration that money is not our master; the Lamb is. When we tithe and give offerings, we loosen our hold on the things of this world by declaring our hearts belong to Christ and our citizenship is in the New Jerusalem, not Babylon. If you’re not in the practice of giving, we have offering envelopes and offering boxes in both lobbies. In addition, we offer secure online giving on our website and app.

Over the last year and a half, because of your joyful generosity, Edgewood has given nearly \$80,000 to special projects and initiatives to benefit our neighbors and the nations.

- \$1,500 to purchase 40 chairs for the Zemke’s church in Japan.
- \$15,000 for materials to renovate a home for a Japanese single mom who was being abused. Our team in Japan has made several improvements for her this week.
- \$3,000 to the Eager’s for tables and chairs for their church in Baja, Mexico.
- \$5,000 to help finish a church building in Spain.
- \$5,000 to El Monte for construction costs.
- \$5,000 to El Monte for legal expenses.
- \$25,000 to construct a building for the Gung’ombe church in Mombasa, Kenya, pastored by Nathan Owino.
- \$1,000 to help with a new HVAC system at One Eighty.

- \$2,000 to Youth Hope to assist with additional costs related to a record number of kids who attended Camp Summit.
- \$3,000 to Fellowship of Christian Athletes for Bibles last year.
- \$5,000 to help Fishers of Men with additional child sponsorships.
- As a practical way to help former Tyson employees, this week we gave \$2,500 to the Youth Hope Food Pantry and \$5,000 to Pregnancy Resources to purchase baby formula and grocery gift cards.

This doesn't count the \$8,000 given as scholarships for those who went on our five mission trips and what Edgewood contributed for our two Disaster Relief trips this year! Last year, we sent two teams to North Carolina and raised over \$82,000 for those affected by Hurricane Helene.

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2. The shattering of human empires. In verses 7-8, John is given an additional explanation of the mystery: ***“But the angel said to me, ‘Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.’”***

The reference to the beast that ***“was, and is not, and is about to rise”*** takes us back to Revelation 13:1-3 when his mortal head wound was healed. This beast, while attractive on the outside, comes from the bottomless pit and will ***“go to destruction.”*** Revelation 19:20 says he will be ***“thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.”*** In other words, the beast may experience a temporary resurrection, but he will never experience an eternal victory.

In verses 9-10, John is given more details: ***“This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while.”***

Commentators differ on the precise meaning of the seven mountains and seven kings. Here are three possibilities:

- **Rome.** Rome was famously known as the city built on seven hills. This interpretation fits the first century setting and may have been especially meaningful to John's original readers.
- **Rulers.** Some interpreters understand the seven kings as a succession of Roman emperors. In this view, John is describing a sequence of rulers, with five having already fallen, one ruling in John's day, and another still to come who will rule for only a short time.
- **World powers.** Others understand the seven kings as representing successive kingdoms or world empires that have opposed God's purposes. A common proposal identifies the five that have fallen as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The one that "is" would then be Rome, with a final kingdom still to come.

What is clear is that John is describing a succession of human powers that appear dominant for a time but remain completely under God's sovereign control. Even the final ruler is given only "*a little while.*" Revelation 12:12 tells us the devil knows "*his time is short.*" That is an important truth to remember: earthly kingdoms may appear unstoppable, but their power is temporary. Evil has an expiration date, and only God's kingdom is eternal.

Let's look now at verses 11-13: "*As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast.*" The Antichrist is related to the seven but also has a separate identity as he rules as an eighth.

This ten-nation confederation will cooperate fully and be united, but their reign will only be "*for one hour,*" which is a figure of speech for being very brief. Revelation 18:10 captures it this way: "*Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come.*"

Now look at verses 15-16: "*And the angel said to me, 'The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.'*" This worldwide ecumenical system, which appeared so powerful and unified, will shatter from within. The beast and the ten kings will "hate the prostitute" and ultimately destroy her.

We've moved from the seduction of the world to the shattering of human empires. Everything Babylon builds will ultimately fall apart. Every human kingdom will crumble.

Every human empire and worldly system that exalts itself in pride will eventually collapse from within and ultimately yield to the absolute sovereignty of the Lamb.

3. The sovereignty of the Lamb. We're reminded in verse 14 how the Lamb will easily overcome and conquer all enemies: ***"They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful."*** Satan will rally the beast, Babylon, the Antichrist, and the forces of humanity to go to war against the Lamb. This will prove futile.

As we pointed out in an earlier sermon, the title "Lamb" appears 28 times in Revelation. While we've seen terrifying beasts, the Bible ultimately exalts the triumphant Lamb who is our redeemer, and the resurrected Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the ***"Lord of lords and King of kings."*** Notice those who are ***"called and chosen and faithful"*** are ***"with Him."*** Because Christ is the conqueror, we are more than conquerors (Romans 8:37).

Worship with me as we fast forward to Revelation 19:11-16, 19-20. Please close your eyes as I read: ***"Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords... and I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur."***

No matter how many personal problems you may have, or how the world seems to be spinning out of control, God is always working His way and His will for His glory, for our good, and for the advance of the gospel among our neighbors and the nations. We see this clearly in verse 17-18: ***“For God has put it into their hearts to carry out His purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”*** Did you catch that? God will move within the hearts of His enemies, bringing them together in one purpose so they hand everything over to the beast.

Think about that. Even in the midst of the beast’s rebellion and Babylon’s corruption, God is still sovereign. Nothing is outside His control, and no one can ultimately thwart His purposes. It’s difficult for us to comprehend, but sometimes God even uses evil people and His enemies to accomplish His purposes. We see this in the book of Habakkuk, when God raised up the Chaldeans to bring judgment against His own people and discipline them for their sin. That doesn’t mean God approves of evil, but it does mean He is so sovereign that even evil cannot escape His purposes.

Ken Sande says it like this: *“Trusting God does not mean believing that He will do all that you want but rather believing that He will do everything He knows is good.”* Proverbs 19:21 says, ***“It is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”*** Psalms 138:8 affirms, ***“The Lord will fulfill His purpose for me.”*** I hold on to Isaiah 55:11 when I’m preparing to preach: ***“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”***

Let me ask you a question. Do you see God as super small or as supremely sovereign? A.W. Tozer writes: *“What you think about God is the most important thing about you.”* When our understanding of God’s immensity slips, we allow other things to overshadow Him, and He becomes inconsequential to us. Instead of praising Him, it’s easy to live for our own pleasure.

Some time ago I heard this phrase: *“We become what we behold.”* Tell me what you’re beholding, and I’ll tell you what you’re becoming.

A high view of God leads to holy living, and a low view of God leads to low living. When we think too highly of ourselves, we think too lightly of God. If we put our purposes above God’s priorities, we will never get what we’re after. Here’s a news flash: Only God can satisfy your soul. Until you worship the Lamb

as Lord, life won't work. The more you marginalize Him, the more you'll live without margin.

When your view of God is big, you will grow, and it will show. The more you grow in your faith, the more you will see Christ as great and glorious. When we stop growing, we'll think we're great and glorious, and our view of Him will shrink.

This makes me think of the dialog between Aslan, the Christ figure in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, and Lucy.

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."

The point is beautiful: Aslan the Lion does not change, but as Lucy grows, her understanding of him grows. God does not become greater; as we grow spiritually, we increasingly see the greatness of the God who has always been infinitely great.

Every human empire and worldly system that exalts itself in pride will eventually collapse from within and ultimately yield to the absolute sovereignty of the Lamb.

To help us move from observation to interpretation to application, let's ponder these eight probing questions.

1. How am I being seduced by the values and attractions of Babylon rather than remaining faithful to Christ?
2. In what ways do I recognize the danger and ugliness of evil even when it appears attractive, successful, and powerful?
3. Am I more captivated by the things of the world or by the beauty and worth of Christ?
4. Is my allegiance clearly to the Lamb, or am I trying to have one foot in Babylon and one foot in the kingdom of God?
5. What worldly influence or persistent temptation is most likely to pull me away from wholehearted devotion to Christ?
6. Do I trust that God is sovereign even when evil rulers and powerful systems appear to be winning?
7. Where do I need to repent and renew my wholehearted devotion to Christ?

8. Am I more impressed by Babylon's glitter or captivated by the glory of the Lamb?

As we close, let's go back to the lyrics of "Bye Bye Babylon."

*Walking back through history
To the mighty city
I put my feet on the streets of Babylon
The gold and the glitter
Towering wonder
It's all within the walls of Babylon*

*Strength and security
Comfort and safety
What could be better than living in Babylon
But their strength was just an illusion
Now this city lies in broken ruins*

*Bye, bye, bye Babylon
This monument to pride is gone*

Every human empire that exalts itself will eventually fall. Every worldly system built on pride will collapse. Babylon's glitter will fade. Its power will pass. Its promises will prove empty.

As I was thinking about that song, I remembered another song with a similar sentiment by Mercy Me called, "So Long Self." Its central message is about dying to self, surrendering control to Jesus as Lord instead of living for your own desires and agenda.

*So long self
Well it's been fun, but I have found somebody else
So long self...there's just no room for two
So you are gonna have to move
So long self...you are wrong for me...farewell
Oh well, Goodbye, don't cry
So long self*

Babylon says, "Live for yourself."
Jesus says, "Deny yourself."

Babylon says, “Exalt yourself.”
Jesus calls us to say, “Goodbye, self.”

Before we can say, “*Bye bye, Babylon,*” we must learn to say, “*So long, self*” for only a surrendered heart can resist the seduction of the world and remain loyal to the Lamb.

Babylon appeals to our pride by telling us to live for ourselves, promote ourselves, please ourselves, and put ourselves on the throne. But the Lamb calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him.

The best way to respond today is with two goodbyes:

Bye bye, Babylon.
So long, self.

And with one declaration. Let’s pray:

Jesus, the Lamb of God, and the resurrected Lion of the Tribe of Judah. I surrender everything to You. You are Lord of lords and King of kings. You alone are worthy of my worship, my allegiance, and my life. I trust You as my Savior and I submit to You as my Lord.

As we close, let’s turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full into His wonderful face. When we do, the things of this world will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

When our eyes are fixed on the beauty of the Lamb, the glitter of Babylon will begin to lose its appeal.

Closing Song: “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus.”

Pick up an “Upcoming Events” flyer as you leave today.