

## **“The Great Prostitute” (Revelation 17)**

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Throughout my adult life, when I’ve encountered words that I don’t understand, I have (sometimes) looked them up. That’s a good way to increase your vocabulary. One of the vocabulary words that I remember, because it’s specific and is hardly ever used, is “venal.” It means “capable of being bought or obtained for money or other valuable consideration” or “open to corrupt influence and especially bribery.”<sup>1</sup> Someone is venal if they are capable of being bribed, if their allegiance is capable of being bought or sold. We live in an era of venal people, an era of sellouts, people who are easily compromised, who will change opinions in order to earn money or power.

You may have heard some Christians use the phrase “sold out,” as in, “she is sold out for Christ.” I’m not sure how that phrase originated, but I suppose it means something like, “She was willing to sell everything she had to follow Jesus.” I wouldn’t use the phrase “sold out” when talking of Christianity, because “sellout” is a negative term—at least when it’s not being used of a concert or sporting event. A sellout is someone who has compromised, who has sold out their integrity, in order to survive. A Christian, however, should not be a sellout. A Christian should be someone incapable of being bought and sold, someone whose beliefs do not waver with the changing and fickle winds of culture.

What we need in this age is people who have integrity, people who have every bit of their lives lined up consistently with the truth. In an age of compromisers, sellouts, and venal and vain people, we need more people unwilling to compromise.

I say that now because today, as we continue to study the book of Revelation, we are going to see Babylon, which represents the kingdom of sinful humanity, described as a giant sellout. Literally, Babylon is called a prostitute. In the last several chapters in Revelation, we see contrasts. There are two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, which stands for the city of God and, in the end, the new creation. We also see two women: the prostitute and the bride. Babylon is the prostitute, and she is compromised. She has sold herself out to idolatry. The city of God is the bride, those who have been redeemed by Jesus. God wants the bride to be pure, spotless, not

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<sup>1</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

compromised. The questions that we should ask ourselves are, “In which city do we truly live? Which woman best represents us?”

Today, we’re looking at Revelation 17. We’ll start by reading verses 1–6:

<sup>1</sup> 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, <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” <sup>6</sup> And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Last week, we looked at Revelation 16, which describes one image given to John, the book’s human author. He saw seven angels pour out seven bowls of God’s wrath. As I said last week, that chapter is one picture of the final judgment, of God judging sin and sinners because sin is evil, a corrupting force that must be rooted out of the world in order for the world to be made new.

Here, one of the angels shows John something else. He shows him one particular aspect of judgment. There is one figure that is to be judged, and that is the great prostitute who is Babylon. Babylon represents the city of man opposed to God. Here, it might represent more specifically the economic and cultural aspects of sinful humanity, and perhaps also the distorted or false religious aspects of humanity. Humans are meant to look to God for meaning and security, for happiness and satisfaction. But sinful human beings tend to put their trust in money and social status, among other things. Babylon is called a prostitute because this city of fallen humanity is willing to sell herself out to whoever can give her money, pleasure, social status, or anything else that we tend to look for in this life.

She is said to be seated on many waters. The kingdom of Babylon, the one that appears in the Old Testament, was seated on waters, namely the Euphrates and channels of water connected to that river (Jer. 51:13). But here, the reference isn’t literal. Later, the angel will tell John, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

languages” (verse 15). This prostitute is “seated” on people from all over the world. The language of “seated” could refer to a sexual act, or it could be just an image of the prostitute sitting on their lap. At any rate, we’re told that the kings of the earth have committed “sexual immorality” with this prostitute. Sexual immorality here is probably a reference to idolatry. The sinful cultural forces of the world and the sinful rulers of the world are both engaged in worshiping false gods. They don’t worship, love, and trust in the true God, the one who created the world and everything in it. Instead, they are intoxicated by idols, false gods like money, power, sex, careers, social status, and anything else that we tend to elevate above God in our hearts. They are cheating on God.

Now, the idol could be sexual immorality. Sex is a great gift given to us from God, but it is one of the most misused gifts there are. But I think the reference to sexual immorality here goes beyond sex to include all idols. Still, there may be some relevance to our particular cultural moment, which I’ll come back to later.

John is carried away in the Spirit to a wilderness, or a desert. In key places in this book, John is said to be in the Spirit (Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 21:10). Each time this happens is a key turning point, or the beginning of a very significant vision. There, John sees this prostitute seated on a scarlet beast, which is the first beast that we read about in Revelation 13. I don’t have time to rehash what we talked about when we read that chapter. For anyone who missed that sermon, you can find it and all the other sermons in this series on our website. (Go to [wbcommunity.org/revelationsermons](http://wbcommunity.org/revelationsermons).) The beast represents sinful political power. However, it’s not always clear that we can divide the economic and cultural power of Babylon from the political power of the beast. But, at least in this chapter, these two are distinguished. At any rate, it seems that the kings of the earth are the beast here, or they belong to the beast, since they are parallel. The seven heads represent seven kings, and the ten horns represent ten kingdoms. These are symbolic ways of including all of the sinful empires of the world.

The prostitute is wearing purple and scarlet, colors of royalty and beauty. She is wearing gold and jewels and pearls, all precious objects—and objects associated with the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:18–21). She may look rather beautiful. She may even look righteous. But the fact that she’s in a desert, and not in garden, is significant. She may look good, but she leads not to a fruitful life, but rather to a barren one. She may seem to offer the water of life, but it’s just a cup full of abominations, things that God hates. She is “the mother of prostitutes,” the one who is

drunk on the blood of Christians. We might say that she led the beast to kill Christians, and she is intoxicated by her ability to steer events in such a wicked way.

I'll try to explain the relevance of this image in a moment, but we should just pay attention to John's words. They are shocking and graphic. He is describing Babylon, which in John's day would have been the Roman Empire, as a prostitute. It's hard to be more insulting than that. And, of course, John is using these words because they are the words that he heard from an angel, who is giving them to John from God. The world's superpower, which would have looked very glamorous and powerful, is being called a whore. She is the greatest sellout there is. And since she is connected to the blood of the martyrs, she is harming Christians. She is opposed to God.

Let's continue to read the words of John. Here is the very end of verse 6 through verse 14:

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. <sup>14</sup> 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."

When John sees the image of the prostitute, he marvels. Perhaps he's marveling because he's wondering what this image means. Perhaps he's admiring her beauty. Regardless of why he is marveling, the angel calls him back to focus. He unravels the "mystery" of this woman. The word mystery generally refers to something that was hidden and is now revealed, or something that is prophesied in a somewhat cryptic fashion but will surely come to pass, perhaps in an unexpected way. The angel reveals what will happen to this woman, but first he spends time talking about the beast.

He says that the beast was, is not, and is about to rise from the pit. This sounds very similar to language used of God in Revelation. God was, is, and is to come (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8; 11:16; 16:5). The language used here is intentional. It may be a way of mocking the beast. Unlike God, who always exists, the beast doesn't exist now, or at least the moment John was writing. Or it may be a reference to the beast imitating Jesus' resurrection. He was, and is not, but will be resurrected late (cf. Rev. 13:3). It also seems to describe what happens to Satan. I don't want to get ahead of myself too much here, but in chapter 20, we're told of a thousand-year period of time during which Satan is bound. Many Christians today think this is a period of time in the future. However, I think that period of time is actually a description of this age, the age between Jesus' first and second comings. And that is historically what Christians have often thought. Satan is bound in the sense that he can't keep God's plans from being executed. He can't stop the nations from coming to Jesus. Similarly, the beast may be dormant for a time, but he will come again.

If the beast represents sinful political powers, the beast reappears whenever violent, godless governments rise from the pit. In John's day, the beast was Rome. When he was writing, that Empire didn't seem as beastly as it did when Nero was the emperor. But soon, there would be more persecution, and there would be waves of persecution for the next two centuries or so. But the beast is more than Rome. Whenever a Hitler or Stalin or Mao or Kim Jong-un is in power, the beast has risen once again. And it seems that there will be a final beast.

Now, I realize that there has been a lot of speculation about who the beast is, but the point of this description is not to identify a specific beast, a final Antichrist. Instead, the passage is meant to warn Christians against compromising. It also serves as a bit of comfort, because we're told that this beast will go to destruction. This beast will die. In Revelation, this beast will be thrown into the lake of fire, and it will be joined by all "the dwellers on earth," people who have worshiped idols and refused to come to the true God. However, the people who have their names "written in the book of life from the foundation of the world" will not be condemned. These are the elect, the ones that God has chosen to be his special people. They are the ones who will put their faith in Jesus. We don't know who is elect or not before coming to faith in Jesus. People who are idolaters today may be strong Christians in the future. All who read or hear this passage are warned against compromise. They are warned not to be enamored by this prostitute or be frightened by the beast. Both will be destroyed.

We're told more about this beast. Its seven heads represent seven mountains, and these seven are also kings. The reference to seven mountains would have been understood by the initial audience of Revelation as a reference to Rome, the city on seven hills. But mountains are representative of kingdoms, so it's not just Rome that's in view. The seven heads who are seven mountains who are seven kings represent all the kingdoms of this world opposed to God.

Now, the reference to five kings being fallen, one presently existing, and another to come is cryptic. Many interpreters have tried to understand this as a reference to Roman emperors. But attempts to number them all have problems. There were more than seven emperors between the first Caesar, Julius, and the emperor in John's day, Domitian. Still, people try to come up with the exact list of emperors that will supposedly fit this scheme.

I think such an approach is wrong because the numbers in Revelation are symbolic. Remember that the Holy Spirit is called the "seven spirits" (Rev. 1:4), even though there is one Holy Spirit. The number seven is all over the place in Revelation. There are even seven appearances of the word "mountain" (Rev. 6:14, 15, 16; 8:8; 16:20; 17:9; 21:10). Seven is a symbolic number, a number of fullness or completion. Since that is the case, the seventh king is the final king in the series. The sixth one, the one that is current, is the present one. The five that have fallen represent the kings and kingdoms that have come before. For John, this would mean that the Roman Empire would, relatively speaking, be over soon. The "seventh" king, the final one in the series, wasn't that far off. He would exist for a little while, and the Roman Empire would then fall. For us, the message may be that empires have come and gone. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Media, Persia, Greece, and Rome were all empires. They have fallen as the world's superpowers. But there will be superpowers in the future. They won't last long, either.

John is told that the beast himself isn't one of the seven, but rather he is an eighth. He belongs to seven, in the sense that he is cut from the same cloth as the seven, and like all those kings and kingdoms, it too will be destroyed.

John is told that the ten horns, which are symbols of power, represent ten kings who will receive power. But they will have power only for one hour, for a little time. Some interpreters think this means that there will be ten nations that come together to form a one-world government. I don't think the number ten is meant to be taken literally. I think the idea is that there will be a final Antichrist, or anti-Christian power that will be worldwide in scope. It will be like Rome when it was beastly, but perhaps far worse. I have no idea what that power is going to

look like. I make no speculations regarding when and where it will emerge. I don't think the point of Revelation is to get us to speculate, but to know that evil is real, that it will look as if it has triumphed completely, but that it will exist for only a relatively short time before it is destroyed.

These beastly nations will make war on the Lamb. The Lamb in Revelation is Jesus. And here we see there are not just two women and two cities, but there are two animals, the beast and the Lamb. The beast, a Satanic power, has evil kingdoms on its side, and they wage war against Jesus. Now, I don't think this is literal. I think this happens while Jesus is in heaven. But the beast and its puppet kingdoms wage war against Jesus whenever they attack Christianity, when they persecute Christians and seek to suppress the Christian faith. It may look like oppressive regimes succeed in defeating Christianity. But we are told that the Lamb will conquer them. Jesus cannot be destroyed. Christianity will not be extinguished. God's kingdom cannot fail. And that is because Jesus is the Lord of lords and King of kings. He is greater than all those kingdoms, those heads and horns and mountains.

Similarly, those who are with Jesus cannot be ultimately defeated. Jesus' people may be beaten down, persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, and even killed, but they cannot lose. They will not go to destruction. And they are described as "called and chosen and faithful." That last word is important. Christians are not to be like that sellout, the faithless prostitute. They are not to be violent oppressors, like the beast and the beast's kings and kingdoms. Christians are supposed to faithfully follow Jesus.

The judgment of the prostitute hasn't been described yet. Now, the angel tells John how the prostitute will come to an end. Let's read verses 15–18:

<sup>15</sup> And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. <sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

As I said earlier, the angel tells John what these waters represent: people from all nations, from across the globe. Just as there are people from across the globe who will be part of God's kingdom, there are all kinds of people opposed to God. But there will be people who turn against

the prostitute. The beast and its kings “will hate the prostitute.” They will not only abandon her, casting her off when they’ve used her, but they will leave her naked and they will devour her and burn her.

That terrible language is used also in the book of Ezekiel. There, God calls Israel a prostitute. She had cheated on God, chasing after the gods of the nations around her. And as punishment, God gives her over to her “lovers” who will leave her naked, abuse her, and destroy her with fire (Ezek. 16:37–41; 23:25–29, 41). If you want some colorful reading, read Ezekiel 16 and 23 this afternoon. And I’m sure that language is intentional. In Ezekiel, God was explaining why Israel fell into the hands of godless empires. Here, God is saying that those who compromise their faith by making it conform to the idols of our age will be judged. God is warning against compromise, against selling out. Jesus warned the churches about this in Revelation 2 and 3. Perhaps Babylon here represents all idolaters, including those people who thought they were Christians and are not. They may have compromised their faith in order not to be persecuted by the beast, by wicked nations. But, in the end, those nations will turn on them. When the nations have used them, they will be discarded.

And this is God’s doing. Verse 17 says that God is the one who put this idea into the hearts of these kings. God is the one who will stir up political power against idolatry. And it’s clear in Revelation that these political powers aren’t trying to do God’s will. They’re not seeking religious reformation. From their perspective, the prostitute isn’t needed anymore. The kings have changed their tune. They aren’t loyal to God or the prostitute, but the beast.

So, what does this mean for us? Babylon in this chapter could represent all those people who form their religious views to suit their own desires. It could represent all the sellouts who edit the Christian faith in order to make it palatable to the shifting winds of culture. It could even represent those false Christians who make their views less offensive so that they don’t get in trouble with the government. Ironically, those who compromise in order to avoid suffering are the ones who will suffer in the end. Those who change their views to match the views of culture and the government may have the government turn on them in the end.

I’m not a prophet, and I make no predictions regarding the future. But I do want to give us an example of what this might look like today. There are presently people who claim to be Christians who compromise Christian ethics so that they match the views of the prevailing culture. More specifically, they make Christianity’s teachings regarding sex, sexuality, and



gender conform to today's prevailing culture. This tendency to change Christian beliefs to please society is one example of selling out. Now, the government is generally in line with these prevailing views of sex, sexuality, and gender. But what if the government changes and becomes beastly to those who sellout, to Babylon?

Of course, there are many other ways of compromising Christianity. We can do this with respect to money, politics, issues of race, and almost anything else. We have a nearly limitless capacity to construct idols and sellout to them.

I want to quickly say a word to Christians. We are called not to sell out. I also want to point out something interesting in this passage. We're told that Christians have their names written in the book of life. We call this eternal security—true Christians can never be separated from Christ. This is God's doing, his sovereign power. But notice that this passage also instructs Christians to be faithful, and to have a mind of wisdom. Christians must strive to be faithful and discerning. We call this human responsibility. The Bible teaches both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. So, Christians, do not compromise.

Here is a word for non-Christians: consider Jesus, the only one who never sold out. Every other human has. Look carefully at those around you. Your family members, friends, coworkers, and politicians have sold out in some way or another. They may have even sold you out. The fact is, we all make compromises. Look carefully at your own life. If you're anything like me, you've prostituted yourself in some way or another, no matter how small. Well, Jesus never did that. Read the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). You will see that Jesus could not be bought or sold. He would never accept a bribe or change his message or behavior to please people or to make life easier for himself. Jesus, the Son of God, came to live a sinless life of integrity, the perfect human life, to fulfill God's designs for humanity. And though he was and is the only sinless person who has ever lived, he was treated as sin itself. He was left desolate and naked on the cross, where he was killed, where he was ultimately put to death to pay for sin. God cannot allow sin to go unpunished. He is a perfect judge. Amazingly, he poured out his wrath on his own Son, and his own Son willingly took that wrath for his people so that they could be forgiven.

If you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, I urge you to learn all you can about him. I urge you to turn to him, to repent of your sins, trust him, and follow him. He is the only one who will never sell out or sell you out.