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(Revelation 17:1-18)

Intro. When I was working an HVAC job in seminary, I was completing a very long day, but was a bit surprised when I looked at our clock to see it was just a few minutes before 4 pm. I began putting my tools away and started to scrub my hands. I was all ready to clock out & my boss asked me what I was doing? I told him I was heading home, because it was quitting time and he said we still had over an hour of work. I looked back at the clock & it hadn’t moved. It quit working, but even a broken clock is correct twice each day. That which we count on for accuracy may lead us astray. As we continue our study of Revelation, today we begin a new series in chapters 17-18 on “God’s Judgment on the World.” We start with Part 1 of “False Religion.”

Theme: God’s judgment

Background: Toward the end of the first-century, John the Apostle, while exiled on the island of Patmos, was given a series of visions within the Revelation of Jesus Christ primarily about the end times.

- Just as the 7th trumpet judgment spoke of the end but then included a 3-chapter look at how things would lead up to the end with the roles of Satan, the Antichrist & the false prophet, so the 7th bowl judgment in chapter 16 speaks of the end (“it is done”) & is succeeded by a 3-chapter look at the work & judgment of Babylon, supported by the Antichrist & defeated by Jesus Christ.
- The chapter opens with a vision of a harlot/prostitute seated on a scarlet beast (vv. 1-6) followed by an interpretation of it (vv. 7-18)

Explanation of the Text:

1. The woman is the great city & a form of false religion which deceives the world & persecutes Christians (17:1-6, 18)

- One of the 7-bowl angels shows John a vision of this prostitute (17:1, 5, 15-16; her sin is called fornication in 17:2, 4) & another 7-bowl angel later shows John a vision of a beautiful bride, the wife of the Lamb (21:9)—when the seductive prostitute is exposed & destroyed, then the Bride of Christ will be seen in all her beauty & true worth (Mounce, 307)
- The OT often portrays religious apostasy as a harlot or prostitute (cf. Isaiah 1:21; 23:16-17; Jeremiah 2:20-31; 13:27; Ezekiel 16:15ff; Hosea 2:5; Nahum 3:4)
- John sees a woman in the wilderness (17:3)—the last time we saw a woman in the wilderness, it was a reference to Israel fleeing Satan (12:6), but it may have been a transformed Israel as the Church (12:14-16)—does John see an apostate Church here?
- Of the 21x harlotry is mentioned in the Bible, 18x refers to the apostate people of God (see above & Ezekiel 23; Micah 1:7)
- If an apostate Church is not in mind, John may be thinking of Babylon the Great as it was the mother of mystery religions, which contort & twist the truth to lead people astray
- She sits on many waters, representing the world (v. 15) & she holds sway over “kings of the earth” (17:2)—sexual immorality is a metaphor for spiritual adultery or fornication
- The woman’s blasphemous names may refer to the blasphemous claims to deity made by Roman emperors, who used titles like divine, savior and lord.
- Arrayed in purple & scarlet with gold & jewels & pearls means she is wealthy & her golden cup of wine refers to her intoxicating power over others—the abominations refer to immoral beliefs & acts—abominations in the OT include idol worship (Deuteronomy 27:15), prostitution (23:18), homosexual acts & sexual perversions (Leviticus 18:22; 20:13), witchcraft, casting spells & divination (Deuteronomy 18:10-11) & surely we could add the abomination of abortion in our land today

Illus: As far as bloodshed goes, more Christians have been persecuted & killed in the last 100 years than at any other time in the history of the Church

2. The beast is the antichrist (17:7-8, 11-14)—a religious & political leader

- Rather than focus first on the explanation of the woman, the angel explains the beast, who is the same from Revelation 13:1-10 & the little horn of Daniel 7—we learn from chapter 13 he is going to be worshiped
- He rules & reigns, which means he is like the other 7 kings & he holds sway over many people & has a kingdom of sorts
- He will unite 10 kings/rulers in the last days to make war against Christ & His people (more on that next time)

Illus: It should not surprise us to discover how various political leaders often use religion to sway the masses—Obama claimed the Christian faith in his first election but his fruit shows a complete lack of biblical Christianity; Donald Trump claims to be a Christian, but there’s no way in the world he is; Hitler privately claimed to be skeptical of religion but never publicly dismissed the Church for political support & stated belief in the “almighty creator”

- If John has Rome and what would become known as the Roman Church in view, then he could be thinking of a pope—if you don’t think the pope is viewed as a religious & political figure & if you don’t think the pope is worshiped, then you weren’t paying attention when he visited the USA a couple of weeks ago

3. The 7 heads refer to 7 mountains & 7 kings (17:9-10)

- If the 7 mountains are literal, almost everyone agrees he is talking about Rome, but a few point out Jerusalem was on 7 mountains, too & the notion of spiritual harlotry would apply especially to Jerusalem, since she had been in covenant with the Lord (*4 Views*, 466)
- Some believe the mountains may be a metaphor for places of power & authority & thus, kingdoms (cf. Daniel 2:35; Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 51:25)
- If literal kings, then most agree they are probably referencing various Roman emperors, but if kingdoms, then most agree the 5 former ones were Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Medo-Persia & Greece & the current one was Rome. The last major kingdom may refer to the Ottomans/Turks or Muslims, but it may be still future.

Application of the Text:

1. Rest assured of God’s control of these antichristian forces (17:1, 14)

- God will judge them (v. 1) & He will conquer those who are in authority (v. 14)—there should never be a question for the Christian about who is in control of all things (cf. Romans 8:28)

2. Stand firm in your faith, because Christians will be persecuted (17:6)

- There were 35,000 Christian martyrdoms in 1900 but 260,000 in 2000 & it continues to grow throughout the 21st century
- We’ve lived in a protected place for the most part, but church-killings & some school-shootings have targeted Christians because of their faith—hiding by not attending with the church is not a valid solution because the Lord wants to find His people faithful rather than fearful

Conc. A young family moved to a new home because the husband had been transferred to oversee a new branch of the business. A couple of years before, he and his wife had their first child & now she was expecting twins. They had talked about making a new start & returning to their roots by finding a church home, a place where they and their children could grow. They attended a church which had a cool atmosphere, fun music, a winsome preacher & lots of people their age. In the upcoming weeks they settled into their “church home” & heard things like hope, peace, success & what Jesus could do for them. Though they would spend the next few decades there, little did they expect they had joined a false church. Concepts of sin, repentance, personal holiness & the atoning work of Christ rarely surfaced in that place, because the preacher had determined those were too negative. The family & many more like them were very comfortable in this life, but they were heading straight for the judgment of God. So what about you? Do you only emphasize the parts of the Christian faith to your liking or do you forsake your ways in surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ?