

Revelation

Escape the Coming Wrath!

Lesson 17

Chapter 17

The Destruction of the Harlot!

1. Read verses 1-6.

There is a certain element of truth in Karl Marx's oft-quoted statement that religion is the "opium of the people." People are incurably religious, because God created them to be worshipers. They will inevitably worship someone or something, if not the true God, then false gods of their own making. People are made with a God-shaped vacuum that they are constantly seeking to fill.

Since the Fall, man's innate longing to know God has been twisted and perverted. People still seek something to worship but no longer seek the true God. In fact, "there is none who seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11), because, as Jesus declared, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him? (John 6:44). Sadly, man's need for a relationship with God has been corrupted by his love of sin. Paul wrote in Romans 1:21 that "even though [people] knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

Into mankind's spiritual vacuum step Satan, "the father of lies" (John 8:44) and his demon hosts, disguised as angels of light (II Cor. 11:14-15) and purveying "doctrines of demons" (I Tim. 4:1). Playing on people's religious bent, they energize religious deception. False religions' powerful appeal comes from its promise to satisfy man's longing for the spiritual realm without bringing him under God's authority. In their rebellion against the true God, and because of their love of sin, fallen men willingly turn to these damning satanic religions. But wonderfully, graciously, mercifully, though man no longer seeks God, God still seeks man. Indeed, it was to "seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10) that Jesus came into the world.

Because false religion is so much a part of this fallen world, it is no surprise that it will play a major role in the end times. During the Tribulation, all the world's diverse false religions will be reunited into one great world religion. That ultimate expression of false religion will be an essential element of Antichrist's final world empire, in holding together his military, economic, and political structure. Only religion can unite the world in the most compelling way. Politics, economics, even military force are unable to overcome the world's cultural diversity. Only religion, with its appeal to the supernatural, can transcend the physical, geographical, historical, economic, and cultural barriers to world unity. Chapter 17 reveals the spiritual nature of Antichrist's kingdom; chapter 18 follows with its material aspects. God will destroy both aspects of Antichrist's kingdom.

Chapter 17 and 18 are inserted into the chronological flow of Revelation, which continues in chapter 19. The pouring out of the seventh bowl (16:17) is actually followed immediately in time by the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to end the great world battle (19:11). Chapters 17 and 18 digress to look not at God's specific judgments, but at what is led by Satan, Antichrist, and the false prophet, before

recording its destruction. John had already heard harbingers of Babylon's destruction (14:8; 16:19); now the details of that destruction will be given in these remarkable visions.

During the Tribulation, people will desperately seek religion because of what will be happening in the world. As the hammer blows of God's judgment (the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments) devastate the earth and terrorize its inhabitants, people will turn in desperation to Antichrist as their savior. Aided by the false prophet and hordes of deceiving demons, Antichrist will establish a **worldwide religion**, "Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth."...

Throughout history...Babylon has been an important center of false religion. In the end times, false religion will come back to where it started. The devil who deceived the people at Babel, and from there launched false religion over the earth, will deceive the world once again.⁴⁵

- (a) In verses 1 and 2, John writes of a great prostitute who sits on many waters. Who is the prostitute (v. 18) and what is represented by the many waters (v. 15)?

[The] chronology halts in chapters 17 and 18 as the scene shifts from God's judgments to Antichrist's world empire, the target of those judgments. The great harlot (prostitute) that will be judged is not an actual prostitute. The term harlot is a metaphor for false religion, spiritual defection, idolatry, and religious apostasy.⁴⁶

- (b) How does John describe the actions of the "kings of the earth" and "the inhabitants of the earth" who become involved in this coming world religion? Explain what he means.

The picture of the woman as utterly evil signifies spiritual adultery, portraying those who outwardly and religiously seem to be joined to the true God but who are untrue to this relationship. The symbolism of spiritual adultery is not ordinarily used of heathen nations who know not God, but always of people who outwardly carry the name of God while actually worshiping and serving other gods...In the New Testament the church is viewed as a virgin destined to be joined to her husband in the future (II Cor. 11:2), but she is warned against spiritual adultery (James 4:4).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid. 156-160.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 161.

⁴⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966). 244.

- (c) Describe what John saw when he was carried away by the Spirit into a desert. Who is this woman (vv. 1-2) and who is the scarlet beast (cf. 13:1, 4; 14:9; 16:10)?

That the woman was sitting on the scarlet beast signifies that he was supporting her. The initial unifying and controlling factor of Antichrist's kingdom will be religion. With the heavens and the earth being ravaged by God's judgments, and the world's political, economic, and military might crumbling, people will turn in desperation to the supernatural. The beast and the woman will coexist for a while; that is, the religion will be separate from the kingdom of Antichrist at first. But eventually "the beast ... will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire" (v. 16). It will be at that point that the false prophet will make the whole world worship Antichrist (13:11-14), and everything will be one in the beast's universal and comprehensive rule.

Scarlet is the color associated with luxury (II Samuel 1:24), splendor, and royalty. It is also the color associated with sin (Isa. 1:18) and the hue of blood. Antichrist will be a splendid, royal, sinful, bloody beast, full of blasphemous names (cf. 13:1). In his arrogant self-deification, Antichrist will take for himself the names and titles that belong to God. He will not only blaspheme God by what he claims, but also by what he says. Antichrist "will speak out against the Most High...and will speak monstrous things against the God of gods" (Dan. 7:25; 11:36).⁴⁸

- (d) Tertullian (2nd century church theologian) stated, "The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is **idolatry**." Define idolatry and give some examples of how people commit idolatry today (Colossians 3:5).
- (e) From verse 4, what phrases does John use to characterize this false world-wide religion (idolatry) established by the Antichrist (beast)? How does God view our own personal idolatries?
- (f) Read Exodus 20:5; 34:14, and, Isaiah 48:11. What do you learn about God from these passages of Scripture? What does God desire from each of us? Do you have any idols in your life? If so, what do you intend to do to remove them?

All idolatry is abominable to God (cf. I Kings 14:22-24; II Kings 21:1-9; Ezek. 20:30-33), and the gross idolatry of Antichrist's false religion will be the worst ever. No wonder Babylon's sins will be "piled up as high as heaven" (18:5), bringing her destruction.⁴⁹

- (g) It was customary for prostitutes to identify themselves in the Roman world. How does this "prostitute" identify herself?

This Babylon is the symbol of all worldly resistance to God; it is described as The Great because of its far-reaching influence. In fact, so great will be its influence that it is called THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. Babylon will be the source of all the false, idolatrous, blasphemous worship in the end times.⁵⁰

- (h) According to verse 6, who will suffer greatly at the hands of this Antichrist-led false religion? Can you think of a religion today that is causing great persecution of God's true children?

2. Read verses 7-8.

- (a) The mysteries of Scripture are hidden truths that God reveals to his children (I Corinthians 2:14). John was astonished at what he saw. The angel promised to reveal the mystery of the woman and of the beast to him. What does John learn about this mystery according to verses 7 and 8?

...the beast that John saw is Antichrist, the satanic ruler of the last and most powerful empire in human history, who will serve as Satan's instrument to attack Israel, persecute believers, conquer the world for Satan, and oppose Christ. Scripture portrays him as an intellectual genius (Dan. 7:8); an outstanding orator (Dan. 7:20); a military leader without parallel in human history (Dan. 7:23); a shrewd, calculation, manipulating politician (Dan. 8:25; 11:21); and the ultimate religious charlatan (II Thess. 2:4). The angel briefly reviews the detailed description of him given in 13:1-10.⁵¹

- (b) What do you think the angel means when he states, "once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss" (13:3, 12)?

- (c) According to verse 8, who will be deceived by this beast (Matthew 24:24)?

⁴⁹ Ibid. 165.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 165.

⁵¹ Ibid. 168.

3. Read verses 9-18.

- (a) This section forms a very complicated passage of Scripture. In verse 9, the angel warns that “a mind of wisdom” is called for. How would you define a mind of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; I Corinthians 1:21, 25; 2:14-16; Colossians 3:16)?
- (b) The beast (Antichrist) upon which the woman (world-wide false religion) sits has seven heads and ten horns (13:1; 17:3). What does the angel explain to John concerning the seven heads and ten horns?

...the text plainly identifies the mountains as seven kings. Mountains are sometimes used metaphorically in the Old Testament to represent rule, or power (e.g., Ps. 30:7; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Dan. 2:35). Here they represent seven world empires embodied in their rulers. The angel tells John that five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come. The five Gentile world empires that had fallen by the time of John’s vision are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The one that existed at that time was obviously Rome. The other one that has not yet come is Antichrist’s final world empire.⁵²

- (c) When the seventh king (empire) comes, how long will he reign (v. 10; cf. 13:5 and Daniel 7:25)?
- (d) How will it be possible for the Antichrist to belong to the seven and then be the eighth king (cf. 13:1-3)? (Hint: MacArthur states that the answer lies in the phrase the beast ...was and now is not.)

The final form of world government, symbolized by the eighth beast itself, is the world empire of the great tribulation time. The revived Roman Empire which will be in sway immediately after the rapture of the church is apparently indicated by the seventh head, while the beast, described in verse 11 as the eighth, is the world empire, which is destroyed by Jesus Christ at His second coming. In summation, what is described in verses 8 through 11 is the final form of Gentile world power in alliance with apostate religion symbolized by the harlot.⁵³

⁵² Ibid. 169-170.

⁵³ Walvoord, 254.

(e) Where is this 8th king headed (Revelation 20:10)?

The angel further explained that the ten horns which John saw are ten kings. They cannot be known to any earlier generation because they have not yet received a kingdom, since they are part of Antichrist's future empire. They will receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. Perhaps Antichrist's empire will be divided into ten administrative regions, which these ten kings will rule under him.⁵⁴

(f) What will be the one purpose of these ten kings?

Further detail is given concerning the final stage of the world empire as having a nucleus of ten kings. These kings in contrast to the seven heads of the beast are kings who rule not in succession but simultaneously at the end time. By comparison with chapter 13, it will be seen that this is the form of the Roman Empire just preceding the world empire. The ten horns' rule as kings is subject to that of the beast itself, and their sphere of power is brief. They are a phase of the transmission of power from the various kingdoms to that of the beast itself. This is shown by verse 13 where it is said that these have one mind and shall give their power and strength to the beast. They are further described as making war with the Lamb, a reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, and their ultimate subjugation under the Lamb is destined to be fulfilled at the second coming. A brief anticipation of this triumph is indicated in verse 14 where the Lamb is prophesied to overcome them as Lord of lords and King of kings. Those on the side of the Lamb are called, chosen and faithful.⁵⁵

(g) With whom will they make war? Who will win?

(h) Read Revelation 19:11-21. This passage pictures the Second Coming when the Lord Jesus Christ will return to establish His Kingdom on earth. Who will return with Him (17:14; 19:14)? Do you want to be part of this returning army one day?

(i) The angel uses some very key words to describe the followers of Jesus Christ. What do these words mean?

- Called (Romans 1:6; 8:29-30):
- Chosen (Ephesians 1:4, 11):

⁵⁴ MacArthur, 170-171.

⁵⁵ Walvoord, 255.

- Faithful (Matthew 25:21, 23; II Timothy 4:7):
- (j) Remember the prostitute is symbolic of the apostate religion of the last days. What will the beast (Antichrist) and the ten horns (his empire) do to the prostitute?
- (k) Who will be “behind the scenes” orchestrating all of this? To what attribute of God does this point (Daniel 4:25)?
- (l) What will the ten horns give to the beast (cf. 13:4, 16)?

Antichrist’s alliance with the false religious system will not last. Eventually the ten horns (the ten kings who rule under Antichrist) and the beast (Antichrist himself) will come to hate the harlot. Having used the false religious system to help him gain control of the world, Antichrist will discard it. In his rampant megalomania, he will want the world to worship only him. He will also no doubt covet the vast wealth of the false religious system. Thus, he will turn on the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire. That graphic language of extreme violence is used to make clear that Antichrist and his henchmen will utterly and completely obliterate all vestiges of the false religious system.

Antichrist’s self-serving, satanically inspired actions are, however, precisely in the scope of God’s sovereign plan. In fact, it is God who will put it in the hearts of Antichrist’s followers to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast. God’s power is behind the destruction and consolidation of the evil empire; as always, Satan is the instrument of God’s purposes. The one-world unification government so long sought by the humanist will have finally arrived, only to be destroyed in one great act of divine judgment. All the words of God—every prophecy of Christ’s return and the setting up of His kingdom—will be fulfilled completely.⁵⁶

- (m) Does it give you comfort to know that God is control?