

The Conquering Christ

Message 10

The Whore and the Dragon

Revelation 17:1-19:4

The Power of Seduction

Tonight we come to the centerfold of Revelation – the whore of Babylon. Look at her, if you dare. Look away if you can. But you cannot keep your eyes off her. Even the great apostle John could not help but gaze at her beauty. And she is a wonder! She rides a magnificent animal. No king or emperor ever rode such a beast – scarlet, with seven heads and ten horns. She is clothed in the most sensual garments of the ancient world – purple (the imperial color), scarlet, gold, jewels, and pearls. And in her hand is a golden chalice with an intoxicating drink. Men, this is the woman of your dreams! Women, this is the woman you fear! No one can resist the allure of Babylon.

But wait! Where are we? Yes, we are in the thick of the war between Jesus and Satan. Chapter 12 introduced us to the initial battles between the dragon and the child. There the dragon was identified as Satan, and the child is Jesus. The child was caught up to heaven, where open warfare broke out between Satan and the angels. Satan was defeated on that battle field and thrown down to earth, where he has continued the war. He spawned two other beasts – the sea beast and the land beast – to assist him in his war against Jesus. These are described in chapter 13. We identified the sea beast as Rome and the land beast as the Jewish religious establishment. Chapter 14 showed us God's perspective on the war. From earth it looked like Christians were being slaughtered left and right by Romans and Jews. From the heavenly throne we saw that Jesus was harvesting His chosen ones – welcoming home His conquering heroes.

After his initial defeat Satan developed a three-part strategy for destroying the church of Jesus. He called the sea beast to intimidate Christians with its overwhelming power. No one could withstand the power of Rome, and some Christians abandoned their Lord rather than provide lighting for Nero's garden parties. Satan used the land beast to confuse the church. Jews who did not believe in Jesus mixed law into the gospel and tried to trick Christians into following this false doctrine. Intimidation and confusion are two of Satan's methods to destroy us. Tonight we see his third method – seduction – the most deadly attack of all. Brave men may courageously face death, wise men may shrewdly avoid confusion, but everyone is susceptible to seduction.

The Whore

The first question we must address is who is this woman? Let us list all the data. She is irresistibly attractive. She is immoral. She is called Babylon. She is drunk with the blood of the saints. She is seated on many waters. All very cryptic characteristics. Chapter 18 tells us she is going to be destroyed for her wickedness. Then all manner of men will bewail her destruction, for they profit by trading with her. Who or what fits these descriptions? Most of us immediately think of Rome – a rich, beautiful, immoral city that persecuted Christians. Rome ruled the Mediterranean Sea, but ultimately fell to barbarians. But what, then, is the beast upon which she rides? The beast has seven heads, which represent seven kings and seven mountains. Now everyone agrees that from very ancient times Rome was known as the city built on seven hills. That seems to be a dead give-away. In a moment we shall see that there were seven kings in the early Roman Empire. We shall consider the beast in a moment, but for now, let us assume it is Rome. That still leaves us wondering who the woman is.

In our studies of Revelation so far, who are the persecutors of the church? Rome and the Jews. So let us see if this woman might be the Jews, or their city of Jerusalem. One of the themes of scripture is the competition between the virtuous woman and the seductress. We just encountered this in our study of Judges in the Sayre Park Bible study. Deborah was a mother in Israel. She reared a godly son, Balak, who

conquered God's enemies. Sisera was the opposing general. Judges presents Sisera's mother as violent and greedy. Proverbs develops this theme at length. It opens saying, "Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice..." (Proverbs 1:20) Wisdom extols her virtues for several chapters until she is personified as a woman who invites you into a feast at her house. Meanwhile, Folly also calls out to young men. "She sits at the door of her house; she takes a seat on the highest places of the town, calling to those who pass by...'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!'" (Proverbs 9:14-16). When you are alert to the themes in the Bible, you immediately see that the whore is the counterpart to the glorious woman we saw in chapter 12. As we compare them, we see that the wonderful clothes of the whore – the purple, scarlet, gold, and gems – are actually a poor substitute for the clothes of the glorious woman – the sun and stars. And if the glorious woman is the church, the whore is the false church – a wicked counterfeit. Not surprising, is it? All Satan's strategies are counterfeits of the works of Jesus. Babylon is Jerusalem – the city which falsely claimed to be the center of true worship.

Let us take a minute to examine some of the symbols in this passage. Chapter 17:1 says the whore is seated on many waters. We will return to this momentarily, but notice also that verse three says she is in the wilderness. She is also seated on a scarlet beast. Verse 15 tells us that the waters upon which she sits are "peoples and multitudes and nations and languages." Earlier we saw that the sea is a symbol for the gentiles. So we have a whole cluster of symbols that all point to the same general idea. Waters = sea = "peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" = gentiles = wilderness —> Rome. Now if we go back and read Revelation again from the beginning, it will read much differently. This is what I meant by saying that to understand this sort of literature you must learn the symbol language. Let me ask you a question. How many times have you seen the movie Memento? Equilibrium? Lord of the Rings? If you read Revelation as many times as you have seen your favorite movie, you will understand it!

But back to the text, do you see now the significance of the wilderness? In chapter 12 we saw the glorious woman fleeing into the wilderness to escape the dragon's attacks. This was Paul and other Christians appealing to Rome for protection against the Jews. The wilderness is symbolically equivalent to the sea which represents the gentiles. At first the Romans protected the church from the attacks of the Jews. Now we see the whore also in the wilderness. Or, another way of putting it, she is riding a beast. This is the Jews being supported and deriving their power from Rome. Until they revolted in A.D. 66, the Jews were also protected by Rome. The Jewish leaders held power only because Rome permitted them to rule. The lust for power is why the Jews wanted to get rid of Jesus. In John 11:48 the Jewish leaders are talking about the disturbance Jesus is causing. They say, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." And as the Romans began to turn on the Christians, they came into a closer alliance with the Jews. The many waters also shows the far-reaching influence of Jerusalem. Jews had spread out into all parts of the empire, and their evil influence was everywhere. Rome and Jerusalem were both called by Satan to destroy the church.

The Beast

Now let us turn our attention to the beast upon which the whore rides. It is the sea beast that was introduced in chapter 13. Both beast visions have seven heads and ten horns. In chapter 13 it came from the sea. Here the beast is equivalent to the many waters upon which the whore sits. Now we learn more details about this beast. We have already noted that the seven heads are seven mountains, which leads us to think of Rome – the city of seven hills. The seven heads also are seven kings. Five have fallen, one is ruling, and another will rule briefly. This describes the succession of emperors in the Roman Empire. Julius Caesar was first, followed by Augustus, Tiberias, Caligula, and Claudius. Nero was ruling when John wrote this book. He makes six. Following him were the three men who ruled only a matter of months in "the year of the three emperors". The next significant ruler was Vespasian – the head who had not yet come when John wrote this. You may object that Vespasian does not fit the text, since the text says he will remain only a little while. Vespasian ruled for ten years, but the climax of this book occurred only one year after his reign began.

Anyone who attempts to interpret Revelation must come to terms with the heads and horns of this beast. It is a daunting task, and I suppose every writer has a different view. Some scholars interpret the ten horns to be the Roman emperors from Julius to Vespasian, counting the three who only ruled a few months. That relieves them of the awkwardness of skipping those three rulers, but it transfers the difficulty to interpreting the seven heads. But let us look closely at the ten horns. Verse 12 says very specifically that they are “ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, with the beast.” (17:12) From this verse we can say that whoever they are, they had not yet come to power when John wrote Revelation in early A.D. 60s. Whatever power they had, it was brief. Perhaps they actually ruled longer, but John only saw as far as the end – as we saw in the case with the seventh head. Finally, they all rule simultaneously. This seems to push us to the conclusion that they were rulers who exercised power during the reign of Vespasian in A.D. 69 and following. So who might they be? I am not sure. I find most suggestions unlikely. My guess is that they were commanders of the legions that sacked and destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It would have been easy to identify them then, but almost impossible now.

If the whore is Jerusalem, verse 18 may come as a surprise: ““And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”” Without a doubt the city that ruled the earth was Rome. Should we go back and revise our interpretation? No, because Rome was *not* the world power in the first century – not according to the view from the throne. Remember, Revelation is presenting God’s perspective. From earth, certainly Rome appears to have the power. But Jerusalem is where the temple was. And there in the holy of holies was the fire and cloud of God’s presence. Which is more powerful, the throne of Caesar or the throne of God? Does God control Caesar, or does Caesar control God? And who will have more influence – the advisors to Caesar, or those who pray to God? Listen to psalm 149.

- 5 Let the godly exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their beds.
- 6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
- 7 to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishments on the peoples,
- 8 to bind their kings with chains
and their nobles with fetters of iron,
- 9 to execute on them the judgment written!
This is honor for all his godly ones. Praise the LORD!

If nothing else, hasn’t this book shown that God rules the nations? Spiritually speaking Jerusalem was the center of the universe – “the great city that had dominion over all the kings of the earth.”

The Seduction of Babylon

So far we have seen the dragon and his two beasts waging war against the Lamb. The whore is another manifestation of the land beast. The land beast looked like a Lamb, but spoke like a dragon. It looked like Jesus, but it was a counterfeit. You could tell by its teaching. The land beast was allied with the sea beast and caused people to worship it. Since the land beast looked like a lamb, it confused people, and some Christians left Jesus to follow this beast. The land beast was the Jewish religious establishment. It said, “Following Jesus is fine. You just need to keep the law, too.” But Jesus requires that we trust in Him alone. The gospel of the land beast will not save anyone.

Now we have Babylon, the luscious pin-up of Revelation. She also is allied with Rome. She also seeks to destroy the church, but she has a different approach. Her strategy is to seduce Christians into abandoning Jesus and worshipping the sea beast. And how successful will she be? Look around you, or read

the Bible and you will see how easy it is for Christians to fall into sexual sin and marry unbelievers. Seduction is deadly because it works! It taps into man's deepest longing for a woman. Babylon is Jerusalem, the city which beckons, "Come worship with me! Be dazzled by my golden temple. Be awed by the drama of sacrifice. Experience the ecstasy of Levitical music. Can you not see that God is here? Leave your pathetic worship of Jesus, and come back to real worship that looks and feels like worship."

If you had to choose between sneaking into someone's house to hear someone read and explain a letter from the apostles, say prayers, and eat some bread and wine with a few other believers – or go to the lavish worship at the temple in Jerusalem – which would you choose? If you were a Greek used to worshipping in the amazing temple of Diana or Zeus, don't you think that Christian worship would begin to seem trivial? If you grew up going to Jerusalem every year at Passover, Pentecost, and Atonement Day – joining the bustling throngs and singing psalms with thousands of other Jews – don't you think that you would feel cheated by the meager ceremony of Christians? Many Jews felt this way. There is a whole book in the Bible devoted to explaining that Christian worship is much better than temple worship. The book of Hebrews encourages believers to stay with Jesus, even if Christian worship is not as externally lavish as other religions.

The worship in the temple of Jerusalem was not inherently wrong. It was established by God in the Old Testament. Jesus worshiped there, and the apostles continued to pray there after Jesus went to heaven. The issue is not whether one should pray in the temple or not. The issue is a matter of faith. Are you trusting Jesus for salvation, or are you trusting the temple sacrifices? The book of Hebrews teaches with great emphasis that the temple sacrifices cannot save anyone. They never could. Only Jesus can save. The temple sacrifices always only pointed to the coming of Jesus. He would be the sacrifice which is really effective in cleansing us from sin. Old Covenant believers trusted in a Messiah to come, and New Covenant believers trust in Jesus who has come. Neither trust in animal sacrifices to save. So pray in the temple court if you wish – but now that Jesus has come if you trust in the sacrifices to save you, you are damned.

The Fall of Babylon

Babylon is delightfully beautiful – but deadly. She lures men into her bed where they burn in hell. Anyone who spurns her beauty inflames her anger – and these she kills. The gorgeous centerfold with the golden chalice drinks a revolting mixture which contains the blood of believers who resisted her charms. The outward beauty is a grotesque monster, a vampire who sucks the life from all around her. Not content merely to kill, she drinks the blood of her victims in an anti-sacrament. Scripture portrays the blood of the innocent as crying out for vengeance. So from the depths of her body goes forth the call for vengeance against Babylon.

The end of chapter 17 explains how she will meet her end. Rome will turn on her and totally destroy her. Jerusalem worshiped Rome. She made others worship Rome. She trusted in Rome. But finally Rome turned on her. Rome saw her as the disgusting whore that she was, and Rome hated her. Verse 16 says, "They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire..." Recoil in horror as you see the one you desired stripped, beaten, torn limb from limb, and burned alive. How awful, that such a gorgeous woman was treated so savagely.

Chapter 18 is a lament – a special type of poetry. It follows the style of the laments for Babylon and Tyre in Isaiah 21, 23, and Ezekiel 27. Verses 2-3 introduce the theme – "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" Two reasons are given for her fall. All the earth has fornicated with her, and merchants have enriched themselves by her luxury. Here, as throughout scripture, sexual immorality is a metaphor for spiritual unfaithfulness. Jerusalem rejected Jesus and worshiped a false god. This is spiritual immorality. Then she seduced the whole world to follow her. She must die for her crimes. Jerusalem also grew rich through her false worship. For this also she must die.

Verses 4-8 announce the verdict for her crimes. "For this reason her plagues will come in a single day, death and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her." Verses 9-10 are the lament of the kings who fornicated with Babylon. Verses 11-17 record the cries of the merchants who grew fat off her trade. Verses 17-20 tell of the anguish of the seagoing merchants. Verses 21-24 sound the final doom of this wicked city.

In chapter 19 we have the response of the saints. All the inhabitants of the earth bewailed the fall of Jerusalem, but the saints and angels rejoiced. How is this? Are they so crude they are unable to appreciate the beauty of the temple and the splendor of its ceremonies? Are they viciously bloodthirsty and enjoy seeing others suffer? No. The saints and angels celebrated because justice was done. God gave Babylon 40 years to repent. For 40 years she tormented the church and killed Christians. Justice will not wait forever. Now is the time. God was faithful to His own character by granting both mercy and justice. Heaven also rejoiced because a terrible threat to the church was eliminated. Babylon will never again harm the church. With her out of the way, the gospel can go forward to the whole world. And finally, Babylon's destruction was the wrath of the Lamb avenging His murdered bride. We shall see next week that the metaphor of the virtuous woman morphs into a bride for the Lamb. Here the battle between the virtuous woman and the seductress comes to a head. Seen in that light, the death of Babylon is the punishment for her murder of the bride of the Lamb. With Babylon dead the marriage can go forward.

Come Out and Rejoice

One application of this passage is to follow the example of the heavenly choir. It is right, godly, and even necessary to rejoice in the destruction of the wicked. Many Christians recoil from this. It sounds so harsh, so vindictive, so hateful. Well, it is true that Jesus calls us to be mild, forgiving, and loving. But what most Christians forget is that there is a war on. We will discuss this further next week, but for now consider the nature of war. In war people get killed and stuff gets blown up. You may not like that. You may hope to minimize it. But you cannot prevent it. There will be continual war until Jesus returns and banishes Satan forever. Meanwhile, the key question is this. Which side will win? Do you want Jesus to win? Or do you want Satan to win? If you are on Jesus' side, you will want Him to win. And that means that Satan will lose. It is a good thing for Satan to lose. It is good news when evil is destroyed. If you are truly on the side of Jesus who is fighting Satan, you will cheer Him when He wins a battle. Pray for Jesus to win. Pray for the destruction of the wicked. And celebrate when they die.

The other application comes from chapter 18:4-5. "Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities." Come out of Babylon. The whore's sins are great, and she will die. Leave her while there is time to escape.

The early Christians did this literally, in obedience to Jesus' command. Listen to Matthew 24:15-18.

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

By the time the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem in A.D. 69 there were no Christians in the city. They all had left.

Babylon is seductive false religion. It is not weak or troubled churches. It is not the Roman Catholic Church or the Episcopal Church or any other Christian church that seems deficient. It is religion opposed to Christ. In the first century it was specifically Jerusalem and the false religion of the Jews who rejected

their Messiah. In any age it is any religion which seduces people to trust someone other than Jesus.

Have you ever driven east on the Washington D. C. beltway? There comes a place where you round a bend, and rising up before you is an awesome sight. Pillars of marble penetrate the sky, and towering over all is a golden angel blowing his trumpet. Just the sight from the highway is enough to evoke wonder. If that is what we see here, what must the inside look like? What would it be like to worship in such a place? The way to find out is to become a Mormon.

You are no less susceptible than anyone else to the seduction of false religions. Some, like Mormonism, are visually appealing. Others, like Unitarianism, may be intellectually attractive. Islam draws people because it claims to have a higher moral standard than Christianity. This is a false claim but it appears true sometimes and deceives people. Hinduism and Buddhism are appealing because they are less exclusive than Christianity – a claim which suffers by the persecution of Christians in India. The original whore was destroyed, but this strategy works so well, Satan keeps producing a vast array of false religions to lure people away from Christ. Communism was the false religion of the 20th century. It was so effective, it captured the hearts of millions of people, and even had so-called Christians promoting it. Let me add that capitalism, as a way of life, is also a false religion. One of the newest and most vigorous false religions is environmentalism. Al Gore has become the high priest for this religion with his film, *An Inconvenient Truth*. Christians, more than anyone, should strive to protect the environment, so the concerns of Mr. Gore and others are legitimate. But global warming is not to be feared. God is the one we must fear, and Jesus, not the Kyoto treaty, will be our savior.

The most lethal temptation comes in a package of physical and spiritual adultery. Perhaps you will not be seduced by a false religion by itself, but you will be tempted by a man or woman to leave Jesus. Sexual attraction is the most powerful force in your life. This is good. God made you this way. And if you think that you are too strong to be tempted by an attractive unbelieving man or woman, you are very foolish. Guys, a fun, warm, beautiful woman can entice you to leave Jesus for some other faith. Girls, a handsome, strong, intelligent man can tempt you to leave Jesus. When you have become emotionally entangled with an unbeliever, you will find a million ways to rationalize your unbelief. Satan would not use this strategy if it did not work, and it works very very well. The remedy is very simple, but it can be very hard to apply. Never become close to an unbeliever of the opposite sex. You are playing with fire. Do not avoid unbelievers of the opposite sex, but keep your friendship superficial. Your deep friendships should be with your own sex and with Christians of either sex. If you are dating or becoming close to a wonderful man or woman who is not a solid Christian, you must terminate the intimacy. Now. Do not make excuses or plead that your case is special. Every case is special. If you cannot see the danger, you are already in too far. Tell your friends you want to back out. Do it tonight. Let them help you get free from an entanglement which may ruin your faith.

Satan is stronger and more crafty than you. You cannot beat him in a battle of strength or wits. But Jesus rules Satan like a cat with a mouse. You must cling to Jesus. Do not trust your own wisdom. Do not trust your own will power. Do not trust your good works. You, by yourself, are entirely untrustworthy. But Jesus is always faithful. See the filthiness behind the charms of false religions. Be disgusted by the whore. Love Jesus, and be infatuated with His love. Amen.

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