

THE GREAT PROSTITUTE

Did you understand everything in this chapter when we read it together? May be not. I have spent a bit of time with it and still experience difficulty in fully grasping its meaning and application. But it comforts me a bit knowing that even reliable and expert commentators admit to facing baffling things here. In spite of the difficulties, this chapter 17 is a vital part of the message of this book Revelation. It helps us understand the evil in the world and what God is doing about it. As we look at it we ask God's Spirit to help us see at least the main message of this chapter and in such a way that we can praise God and be helped along in our own faith.

There are eighteen verses to take into consideration and we will be kind of going back and forth through the chapter, so therefore, I advise you to keep your Bible open in front of you. I think it will help you to keep track of what I am saying. [And, of course, the outline is there to help as well.]

The chapter as a whole is about THE GREAT PROSTITUTE and in the first place we try to come to terms with her appearance and identity; and in the second place we look at her past, present, and future.

1. The prostitute's appearance and identity.

One of the seven angels, whom God used to pour out the bowls of His wrath, said to John in verse 1, "*Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute.*" But chapter 17 only describes this prostitute and it's not until chapter 18 that we see what her punishment is.

Now I don't know about you but I have never knowingly met or spoken to a prostitute. But we do read about them in the Bible and they are found in most cities and they appear in books and films. We also know what a prostitute does. She entices and seduces men in order to sell her body to them for a price. And there are men who are willing to pay that price and commit immorality with her. It is the lust in men for sex that allows prostitutes to exist in the first place. Now everybody knows this and, therefore, we at least can understand this chapter 17 when it speaks about the devil seducing people who in their hearts have a lust for sin.

Chapter 17 wants us to think of this seduction taking place on a global scale. Verse 1 tells us that the prostitute "*sits on many waters.*" What could that mean? Well, verse 15, yes, look it up, explains that the waters "*are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.*" In the Old Testament the prophets Isaiah [8:7; 23:10], Jeremiah [46:7; 47:2], and Ezekiel [29:10] speak of enemy nations attacking Israel like a river in flood. You have all seen how a flooded river breaks out over its banks and spreads its waters on the surrounding land. So also did enemy nations in Old Testament times flood the land of Israel. The prostitute of chapter 17 is, therefore, not a single person but a whole lot of people, who, like a lot of water, are everywhere.

Then verse 18, yes, look at it, says that this woman, this prostitute, is also "*the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.*" And back again in verse 5 she is identified as Babylon the great. So the great prostitute is: 1 - a whole lot of people; 2 - she is also the great city; and 3 - she is also Babylon the great. By the way, you might wonder why verse 5 is in capital letters. It's like that in the original Greek and it's probably done for emphasis.

Historically, Babylon was the great city and capital of Assyria in Old Testament times. But the prostitute was not only Babylon, she was also the great city of Rome. Some think that Jerusalem was also the prostitute because she refused to accept the Messiah and seduced its inhabitants away from the worship of God.

But the prostitute was not just one city and then another. She is also the secular, worldly city of all time. Like water, godless society spreads herself over the earth and seduces people with her immorality. Just like a prostitute seduces those interested in her.

If we were around in the days of Isaiah and Jeremiah and heard the name Babylon, or in the days of the early Christian church and heard the name Rome, then we would straightaway be thinking of these cities as worldly places of wickedness and seduction. They were centres of arrogance, power, corruption and godless pleasure. Just like a prostitute flaunts herself so also did these cities displayed their charms and people flocked to them.

But the Word of God here does not want you to think only of such cities of the past, no, the great prostitute is everywhere and anytime. She is called Babylon because that name came to represent an evil power, seducing people into sin. It's a bit like the name Jezebel. She was a wicked and immoral woman in the time of some

Old Testament kings. But her name comes up whenever a woman wears outrageous make-up and dresses provocatively in order to attract attention and seduce men.

Now in verse 3 we are further told that this prostitute sits on a scarlet beast that is absolutely revolting and hideous. It has blasphemous names all over it and has seven heads and ten horns. We have heard of this terrible beast before, in chapter 12, where it was the dragon and symbolised Satan. And again in chapter 13 where it comes out of the sea and out of the earth. The seven heads suggest enormous vitality. So it is very hard to kill. You can knock it on the head but which one, it has many heads. This hideous beast also has ten horns. In the Bible a horn is a symbol of strength. Ten horns suggest that the beast has enormous power.

And now on this terrible, vigorous and strong beast sits the prostitute. But a moment ago we noted that she sat on many waters. It would seem to mean then that the woman and the beast together surge and sweep across the world to seduce and entice people with enormous vitality. You just can't get of her, remember, she has seven heads. And she has such great power, remember, she has ten horns.

What does it all mean in terms we can understand? What is the Lord saying here to His church in the world? Well, you may remember that Revelation identifies the devil working in mainly three ways. One: Satan uses power, exercised by anti-christian governments and organisations. It's the beast out of the sea. It's open persecution. It takes place when the Christian faith and Christians are forcibly restricted. We do not have this as yet in Australia but believers in some communist countries experienced it. So also nations with a strong Hindu or Islamic religion. And also parts of Indonesia.

Two: Satan also uses ideas, like pagan thinking. It's the beast out of the earth. This is a more subtle kind of persecution. Satan gets people to argue that there is no God, or that God only exists in one's imagination. And the belief that there is no God means that His Word with all what it says has no authority. What counts is what man thinks and what rules he chooses to live by at a particular time. This form of Satan's influence we have in Australia. It's shows it self in pro- abortion, pro-euthanasia and pro-homosexual practice and many other practices that the Bible forbids.

These two ways, power and ideas, were identified in chapter 13 and we have already dealt with them. But there is a third way: Satan also uses the power of seduction. And that is highlighted here in chapter 17. It's the prostitute seducing people to accept the ways of the secular world. It's the kind of world that says - we are getting along fine without God and without the Bible. We're saying that you are important. It is your rights that count. This world of secularism and humanism is like a city of bright lights promising excitement, luxury, glamour and vice. It's a world that John described in his first letter as a place where there is - "*the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does*" [2:15]. You and I know this world, for it is there daily on our television screens. The Big Brother program is a clear example of it. It's also there with pornography, materialism and gambling.

The attractions of glamour, power, wealth, sex and sin, can seduce both kings and the common people, says verse 2. But not only them, also leaders in the church as well as ordinary person in the pew. There are rulers who want to be seduced and there is the ordinary man in the street who enjoys being a part of it. They are, as it were intoxicated with the wine of the prostitute's adulteries. The secular city is very good in the art of seduction. The woman, representing this kind of world, is according to verse 4, dressed in eye-catching clothes and adorned with costly and glittering jewels. She offers a cup, yes, a golden cup, attractive and hard to resist, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. And people drink from it. She is, says verse 5, "*Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes, and of the abominations of the earth.*"

And verse 6 tells us that "*the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.*" It is Satan attacking the church of God in the world because the true church of God opposes what she does. Therefore Satan seeks to destroy the church. Through the years of history, Babylon has become drunk with the blood of God's people.

Now it says in verse 3 that John saw all this in a vision in the desert. But why did the Spirit take John into the desert? Well, isn't that also the place where the other woman is, the church of Jesus Christ! The church on earth is the church in the wilderness. She belongs to Christ and must please and honour Him, and therefore she cannot live in the secular city because Christ and His rule and influence are not welcome there. The church is like Old Testament Israel who after she came out of Egypt had to exist in the desert because no other nation, like Edom and Moab, wanted Israel near or within its borders. Similarly, the church does not fit in the secular

world but has to travel through the wilderness to the promised land of the new Canaan, the new heaven and earth.

But it is in the desert where the church can see much better the falsehood and the emptiness of the city. The desert is her vantage point. It is in the desert where God feeds her and is able to look after her with heavenly manna. If the church were to identify herself with the city, then she can no longer clearly see the anti-Christ nature of the city. Indeed, how easily can Christians absorb the anti-Christian education of the secular city, her pagan culture, art and entertainment! And when Christians have been seduced then they begin to think and speak and behave as do the people of the pagan world. They have given away the Christian faith and practice as easily as a weak man gives in to an adulterous woman.

We have in the first place, then looked at the appearance and identity of the great prostitute, and hopefully chapter 17 is not quite so difficult as it first seemed. We are beginning to see how timely its message really is.

2. The past, present and future of this prostitute.

There is a mystery about this seducing woman and it needs, says verse 9, a mind with wisdom. The passage then goes on to speak about the history of the woman and the beast, namely, its past. But also its present and future. What is this mystery?

Well, sometimes we ask - how is it possible that evil and wickedness just go on and on, even when those doing it are disgusted by it? Why does the alcoholic keeps on drinking when he hates it? Why does the junkie keeps on taking drugs when he wants to be free from his addiction? Why does the adulterer do it again when he knows it is wrong? Why do politicians keep breaking promises and then try to justify why they did it? Yes, why is it that people who know that their particular sin is destroying themselves and others, keep on going back to it? It's like the dog returning to its vomit.

Children who grow up in homes with drunkenness, domestic violence and marital breakdowns have grown to hate such situations. Yet they often find themselves doing the same things later on in their own lives. They don't like it and yet they go back to it. It's the same with societies who are brutally oppressed. Finally they can't take it anymore and rebel. There is a bloody war and then after the freedom has been won the new masters become worse than the old rogues they replaced.

Now isn't that a mystery? Why does it go like that? Well, verses 8 and 11 tell us that evil in mankind returns again and again. The beast once was, and now is not, and yet will come. It was there in the past, then seems to disappear for a while, only to re-appear again at a later time. It helps us understand why the beast has seven heads and ten horns. Evil has lots of vitality and is very strong.

When the angel speaks in verse 9 of the seven heads as the seven hills then one has to think of the city of Rome for it, as history says, was built on seven hills. But Rome was only one representation of the woman and the beast. Verse 10 speaks of seven kings or seven kingdoms or powers. Some have fallen, one is present, others are still to come. Again we have a past, a present and a future. It's the ebb and flow of history.

History is full of mighty empires of the past - Assyria, Babylon, Medes and Persians, Greece, Macedonia, and the Roman empire. Or the great world cities of the past - Nineveh, Tyre, and Rome. Or different emperors and rulers of the past - Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Nero. And more recently - Hitler, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein. Then we can look to the present and one again name powerful nations and cities and rulers. And then we can have an educated guess as to what and who these might be in the future. It's the flow of history and it will go on until the coming of Christ.

Verse 12 speaks of the ten horns who are also kings but they have no kingdoms and received authority for just an hour. With that brief authority they have only one purpose in mind - it's to pass on their power and authority to the beast.

Might these not be all the different institutions in the secular city, such as non-Christian trade unions, education, art, entertainment, yes, all the various manifestations of the secular world? They have a measure of power but use these to honour the beast and make war against the Lamb. Visit some museums, modern-art exhibitions, and you see things that are grotesque and lewd. It's opposite to what Christ stands for - harmony, beauty and purity. To counter all this, many Christians have seen the need to create Christian schools, Christian trade unions, Christian universities, and so on.

Then a strange thing happens. Verse 16 has the beast and the prostitute experience a falling out with each other. Fancy that. Satan, who is the beast, and the secular world, which is the prostitute, begin to hate each other. Then again, may be it's not so strange. Remember that the Lord Jesus said that Satan is divided against itself? It's in the nature of evil to not be able to keep a united front. It always turns against itself.

So why does the beast begin to hate the woman? It's because of her immorality. Talking about the pot calling the kettle black. The beast and the woman were so close, like horse and rider, but in the long run the one begins to expose the wickedness of the other. One is always amazed how the secular world for a long time quietly tolerates corruption and then one day someone blows the whistle and it's all out in media. With a pretend purity evildoers are telling everyone how bad the others are. A big clean-up is called for but after a while the cleaners becomes the dirty ones.

So the world without God is self-destructive. Emperor Nero blamed the Christians but many believe it was he who burned the city of Rome. Civilisation builds beautiful cities then throws bombs on them. Man develops nuclear energy for industry then uses the same awesome power to destroy others. The world is like Judas Iscariot whose love for money made him succumb to bribes to betray Jesus. Then, filled with revulsion for his vile deed, destroys himself.

J. H. Bavinck, in a book on Revelation, makes the comment: world history is suicide, world history is a going down into the abyss. Man engineers his own downfall. God does not even have to lift a finger. But then Bavinck goes on to say: Or does God become involved? Does He have a hand in it? Is God present in the meeting rooms of boards of directors and in governments where He influences decisions that are harmful to men? Does God quietly invade the minds of those in Washington and Moscow, London and Paris, Brussels and Bonn, and Canberra? To be at the back of any godless plan they devise, to turn it on its head. Is God working through the dealings of men who are without Christ, yet uses them to execute the power of His wrath and vengeance? The apostle Paul wrote to Christians persecuted by the Roman Empire, "*Leave room for God's wrath, it is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord*" [Rom.12:19]. In the passing of time the once mighty Roman Empire collapsed. In fact, all men's empires have collapsed and will continue to collapse right up to the coming of Christ.

Is that God? asks Bavinck. Will God, who so carefully, it seems, remains hidden throughout the centuries of history, allow man to destroy himself? Yes, the Bible shows God allowing Old Testament Israel and Judah to go into captivity. God allowed the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. God allows wars to take place. God allowed communism to kill millions of people. God allowed the rise of Islam. No, God is not the author of evil and man is fully responsible for his evil deeds. But God allows men to go down through man's own folly and madness. It is man's doing but it is also God's doing. The angel said to John in verse 14: "*They make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them, because He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings - and with him will be His called, chosen and faithful followers.*" And when the beast and the woman fall out and begin to hate each other, then the angel says in verse 17, "*For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish His purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled.*"

So the judgment from God will actually break out from within the centres of evil. When various power structures within society go against God's will for mankind, then God causes these structures to self-destruct. When men turn against Christ, then God will in the end cause them to put their hand against themselves. Like Judas did.

Yet, in all this the secular, godless world does not seem to realise that at the back of its folly and madness there stands God. Yes, when godless men push God away, then He will in time cause them to destroy themselves. Yes, when godless men ignore and silence their own conscience, then in time God will come to haunt them. Yes, when godless men try to silence the voice of Christ, then God will take their peace away. But this same God will also rise up to punish the great prostitute who is there at every turn to seduce those who turn away from God. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.

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