

# THE PROSTITUTE AND THE BEAST

SERIES: WAKE UP



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## *Revelation 17*

A few weeks ago, my daughter was reading me riddles from a book. She asked, “What belongs to you that others use more than you?” Now, you have to understand my station in life. I have two teenage children. What belongs to me that others use more than I do? I answered, “My money.”

Although I got a laugh from my daughter, there were two problems with my answer. First, it was incorrect, at least according to the book. The correct answer: “Your name.” Second, and more importantly, it was incorrect according to *the* book: the Bible. My money is not my money; it belongs to God. What about money? Revelation 17 gives us a proper posture not only toward money but also toward power.

In Revelation 16, we saw the seven angels pour out the seven bowls containing God’s judgment against the world. Revelation 17 continues the description of what happens when those bowls are poured out. The fascinating imagery in this chapter is perhaps the most complex in the entire book.

## The great prostitute

### Revelation 17:1-2:

**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, 2 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.”**

We haven’t seen “the great prostitute” before in the book of Revelation. Then again, by the time we get to verse 5, we find out that we have seen her before—or, we’ve seen a different image of the reality to which she points. The great prostitute is also “Babylon the great,” a city. John has already seen that Babylon persecutes believers (Revelation 11:8) and that God judges it

(Revelation 14:8, 16:19). John’s readers would have understood this to be a picture of the Roman empire.

By the time we get to the end of Revelation 17, we will see that the “many waters” on which the prostitute sits represent “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages”: those who are in Rome’s sphere of influence.

How is a city also a woman—and a prostitute at that? Rome is a prostitute in that the kings of the earth “commit sexual immorality” with her: the rulers in the known world submit to Roman rule and worship Roman gods, especially Caesar, for the sake of material security and prosperity (Revelation 2:9, 13; 13:16-17). We learn in Revelation 18:9 that the kings of the earth are able to live in luxury because of their relationship with Rome (Revelation 18:9). The rulers aren’t the only ones who have been co-opted by Rome, for “the dwellers on earth”—that is, those who don’t believe in Christ—are also involved.

For John’s readers, the prostitute represents the economic dominance and promises of the Roman empire.

## A woman and a beast

### Revelation 17:3-4:

**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. 4 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.**

Now, instead of seeing a woman sitting on many waters, John sees a woman sitting on a beast. We’ve seen this beast before. It made a brief appearance in Revelation 11:7, but John was given a fuller vision of it in Revelation 13.

The beast also represents the Roman empire—but a different aspect of it. If the prostitute represents the economic aspect of the empire, the beast represents the political aspect of it. The heads and horns represent sovereignty and power—and more, as we shall see. The blasphemous names mean that Rome, in its sovereignty and power, demands that its subjects worship its gods, especially Caesar.

The woman sits on the beast: the economic and political aspects of the empire are entwined. Each contributes to and enables the other. Economic prosperity enables military conquest, and military conquest increases economic prosperity. In this case, the economic aspect and the political aspect corrupt each other.

The woman is a luxurious courtesan, clothed with goods from her paramours (Revelation 18:11-16). She is stunningly beautiful—on the outside. She holds a golden cup that reflects her appearance, but the cup is “full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.” Rome gives you something—economic security, maybe even prosperity—but it demands everything: your worship. In other words, it demands idolatry.

## Mother of prostitutes

### Revelation 17:5-6a:

**And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.”  
6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.**

The woman, now clearly equated with Babylon, is not only a prostitute, but she is also the “mother of prostitutes.” She not only has a cup full of abominations, but she also is the “mother” of “earth's abominations.” In that the woman is this kind of mother, she gives birth to idolatry, so to speak.

Babylon, though it represents the Roman empire at the end of the first century, also represents any empire that is opposed to God, just like the Babylonian empire was opposed to God centuries earlier. Babylon is a mother: it gives birth to more empires. Thus, Babylon, both the woman and the city, is with us today—and will be until the day when it will be completely replaced by “the holy city, new Jerusalem,” which will come down out of heaven from God, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband,” who is Christ (Revelation 21:2).

Earlier, we saw that the earth-dwellers were drunk on idolatry; now we see that the prostitute herself is drunk: she delights in killing believers who don't partake of her delights and who insist on following Jesus.

## Greater riches

There's nothing necessarily wrong with making money, of course. We have to provide for ourselves and for our families. There is nothing necessarily wrong with being wealthy, either. However, there are multiple warnings in the Scriptures, not least in Revelation 17, about what money can do to you if you're not watchful.

The Silicon Valley bears some resemblance to Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes. The Valley has generated phenomenal prosperity. It is, by some measures, the wealthiest area in the entire country. On the whole, however, its residents—the dwellers on earth, if you will—want little or nothing to do with God. Many of them want more to do with making money, some of them with making a lot of money.

A young start-up entrepreneur in the Valley put it this way: “What's cool here is having a lot of money—everybody knows you have a lot of money, but you don't show it off. Money is a metric by which people view and judge success, but, unlike in Hollywood or New York, you have to be very careful about how you spend that money.” One of the acceptable ways to convey one's wealth, he said, is by “casually mentioning that you were hired at Facebook in 2005 and invested in Twitter in 2008.”<sup>1</sup>

Ah, but what's the price? And as we have all seen, there's a dark side to the Valley's prosperity: a housing crisis, increased homelessness, people living in RVs, “now hiring” signs everywhere, punishing commutes, and other traffic woes. Possible solution: Build more housing. Problem: The Bay Area is now the most expensive area to build, not just in the country but also in the entire world—and by a wide margin.<sup>2</sup> God, help us!

For many people, if they have enough money, especially if they have more than enough money, they don't think they'll be in need. And that's the last thing they want: they don't want to be in need. Money can give us the illusion that we don't need God. That's why it's a prostitute. It wants you to commit “sexual immorality” with it: money wants you to forsake God and worship it instead. Money can easily make you spend more time thinking about it and worrying about it and lusting after it than investing in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus told the church in Laodicea, “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Revelation 3:17).

Money’s golden cup is full of abominations and impurities. According to the World Health Organization, people in wealthy countries suffer depression by as much as eight times the rate of people in poor countries.<sup>3</sup>

As Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and money” (Matthew 6:24). And if you serve God? “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Romans 11:33) His riches are “immeasurable” and “unsearchable” (Ephesians 2:7, 3:8). Jesus told the church in Smyrna that though it was poor, it was rich in the things that mattered (Revelation 2:8).

Darrell Johnson, a pastor in Canada, tells the story of the death of his grandfather. As he was dying, just before he took his last breath, he said to his son and his brothers, “O, boys! He’s beautiful!”<sup>4</sup> All we have to do is see John’s visions of Jesus in Revelation 1 and 5 to know Johnson’s grandfather was right.

As for the gold of this world, the book of Revelation reminds us that we are citizens of the heavenly city, even now. And in the vision the book gives us of that city, which will one day come down out of heaven to earth, we are told that they pave the streets with that stuff (Revelation 21:21).

Next, the angel explains the relationship between the woman and the beast.

## **The mystery of the woman and of the beast**

### **Revelation 17:6b-7:**

**When I saw her, I marveled greatly. 7 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.**

One “mystery” has already been revealed: in verse 5, the prostitute was identified as Babylon. Now, the angel promises to reveal another mystery, which has to do with both the woman and the beast, especially the woman’s relationship to the beast. You might be thinking, “Thank you. I need all the help I can get interpreting all of this.” Not often does Revelation interpret itself for you, but it does so more in Revelation 17 than in any other chapter.

## **Destined for destruction**

### **Revelation 17:8:**

**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.**

The angel’s description of the beast in some respects echoes Revelation’s description of both the Lord God and Jesus. The Lord God “is” and “was” and is “to come” (Revelation 1:4, 8; 4:8). Jesus was dead but came to life and is “alive forevermore” (Revelation 1:18, 2:8). Jesus, like the Lord God himself, is “coming” (Revelation 1:7, 16:15, 22:20).

We have already seen the beast rise from the bottomless pit, which is also described as the sea, to persecute believers (Revelation 11:7, 13:1). We have also seen the beast recover from a mortal wound (Revelation 13:3, 12, 14). The beast is resilient, but unlike either the Lord God or Jesus, when the beast comes in a final sense, he meets his demise: he goes to “destruction.”

The earth-dwellers, unbelievers, will marvel at the power of the beast, not realizing that it is destined for destruction. Rome, in its political power, seemed invincible at the end of the first century, but it fell, just like all empires before it. The beast has continued to incarnate empires through the ages and will continue to do so until it is thrown into the “lake of fire” (Revelation 19:20).

## **A mind with wisdom**

### **Revelation 17:9-11:**

**This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 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. 11 As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.**

The beast incarnates Rome, especially Rome’s political power. The seven heads represent sovereignty. But now learn that they also represent seven mountains, which makes sense: Rome was called “The City of Seven

Hills” because it was built on seven hills. But wait a minute: the seven heads also represent seven kings. It’s getting more complicated (it will get even more complicated!), but that makes sense too: Rome was ruled by its emperors.

The seven kings fall into three categories: past, present, and future: five have fallen, one is, and another is to come. The seven kings sound like the beast itself, which is, was not, and is to come. The kings reflect the beast: empires and their rulers come and go.

But wait another minute: the beast is also an eighth king. But wait another minute: the beast also belongs to the seven. At any time, the beast can be an empire or a ruler or both. In any event, the beast, empires and kings that take the place of God, is destined for destruction.

## Making war against the Lamb

Revelation 17:12-14:

**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. 13 These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. 14 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.”**

The seven heads of the beast represent seven kings. The beast itself is also a king. But wait another minute. Now we learn that the horns of the beast also represent kings: ten kings. These kings are like the seventh king, who “has not yet come” and will “remain only a little while” when he does come. Likewise, the ten kings “have not yet received royal power,” but when they do receive it, their authority will last only a little while: “one hour.” We are not, of course, to assume that ten kings rule for only one hour in a literal sense. Like other numbers in the book of Revelation, one hour is symbolic.

From the perspective of the first century, the beast had a future. Roman kings taking the place of God were yet to come. Finally, the empire fell to the Goths in 410, and it only took one week. But the beast had a future beyond the Roman empire, for it has incarnated countless empires and rulers since then. Indeed, such empires and rulers are still with us today, but there will come a time when the beast only has “one hour,” so to speak: “a little while.”

The ten kings—and all rulers who are opposed to God—don’t give their power and authority to God; instead, they give their power and authority to the beast. They’re supposed to serve God’s purposes, but they serve evil purposes instead.

In fact, they will “make war on the Lamb,” who is Jesus, no doubt because they perceive him to be a rival. Up to this point in Revelation, the beast has made war with the saints, followers of the Lamb, and has been victorious—apparently (Revelation 11:7, 13:7). On Easter Sunday 2019 in Sri Lanka, the beast made war with the saints and killed more than 250 people.

## Greater Power

Just as there’s nothing necessarily wrong with earthly wealth, there’s nothing necessarily wrong with earthly power. However, just as Revelation 17 warns about the trappings of money, it also warns against the trappings of power.

For example, governments and leaders are supposed to be servants of God, mediating his justice (Romans 13). When they displace God, they overreach. In some cases, they abuse their power and become beastly. If money is a prostitute, power is a beast.

On the one hand, if you aspire to power or have power, watch out that it doesn’t go to your head. If you started out with good intentions, beware, because those good intentions, if not renewed, can easily morph into abuse of power. Many have lost their way. On the other hand, beware of trusting in earthly power. Even the best leaders have feet of clay. The worst of them are tyrants.

Moreover, one of the lessons of Revelation 17 is this: power is fleeting. By contrast, there is a power that rules the powers, and it is everlasting: the power of the Lord God Almighty.

The Third Reich was supposed to last for 1,000 years. It lasted twelve.

Closer to home, former Secretary of State James Baker once said: “Someone asked me what was the most important thing I had learned since being in Washington. I replied that it was the fact that temporal power is fleeting.” Baker recalled that one time when he was being driven through the gates of the White House in a sleek black limousine, he saw a man walking alone on Pennsylvania Avenue.

In his address at the 1990 National Prayer Breakfast, Baker said:

*He was someone many of you would have recognized—a chief of staff in a previous administration. There he was, alone—no reporters, no security, no adoring public, no trappings of power—just one solitary man alone with his thoughts. That mental picture continually serves to remind me of the impermanence of power and place. That man had it all, but only for a time.*

Observing that “power can be intoxicating,” Baker said he learned this:

*“Having a position of power does not bring inner security and fulfillment. That comes only by developing a personal relationship with God, which for me is personified in Jesus Christ. Inner security and real fulfillment come by faith.”*

Then, with faith, serve the Lamb whatever your station, and trust God.

What happens when money and power get together?

## The beast vs. the prostitute

### Revelation 17:15-18:

**And the angel said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. 16 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, 17 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. 18 And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”**

The ten kings and the beast will not only make war against the Lamb, but they also will make war against the prostitute, which sits on the beast. If the beast and the prostitute represent different aspects of the Roman empire, and ultimately any ungodly empire, why does the beast turn on the prostitute? You see it all the time: evil rulers who are in partnership with each other become suspicious of each other and turn against each other. In this case, the political leaders (the beast) opt for naked power and turn against the economic leaders (the prostitute).

But there’s another reason why the ten kings turn on the prostitute: God motivates them to do so. In this case, God defeats evil by giving one aspect of evil a free hand to defeat another aspect of evil. In Revelation, it may look at times as if evil is winning, but God is in control of everything and will finally vanquish evil. Thus, the words of God will be fulfilled.

The prostitute money and the beast power: put them together, and it’s an intoxicating combination. Money loves power, and power loves money. Until they don’t. Sooner or later, apart from God, it’s all too much, it’s all too intoxicating, it’s all too corrupting. Sooner or later, evil will collapse in on itself, and everything will come crashing down: evil will destroy evil. Jesus anticipated the final day: “And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?” (Matthew 12:26)

## The Lamb wins

David Foster Wallace, in his famous commencement 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, said this about worship, money, and power:

*Because here’s something else that’s weird but true: in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship . . . . If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. . . . Worship power—you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need more power ever over others to keep the fear at bay.<sup>5</sup>*

In Revelation 17, John is showing us “the judgment of the great prostitute,” alluring as she is. He is telling us that the beast, in all its apparent power, “goes to destruction.”

As for the kings of the beast, “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.”

They can kill the Lamb’s followers—just like one of their predecessors, Pilate, killed the Lamb, but in the end, the Lamb wins, and so do his followers, who are “called and chosen and faithful.” Ten kings—even 10,000 kings—can make war with one king, who might not look as if he can put up much of a fight: he’s a lamb, after all. Correction: he’s The Lamb—slain, yes, but also resurrected. He’s Lord of lords and King of kings.

John reminds us that no matter how bad things appear, these things must take place “until the words of God are fulfilled.”

Think about that. All of God’s words, from Genesis to Revelation. We pour over those words here week by week. Every word that we have read and studied and preached from will be fulfilled. Evil will be vanquished, and the marriage supper of the Lamb will commence.

The Lamb wins. And he’s beautiful!

## Endnotes

- 1 George Packer, “Change the World” (The New Yorker, May 26, 2013).
- 2 Louis Hansen, “New Bay Area crown: Most expensive place in the world to build” (San Jose Mercury News, April 25, 2019).
- 3 David Brooks, “The Great Affluence Fallacy” (The New York Times, August 8, 2016), A23.
- 4 Darrell W. Johnson, Discipleship on the Edge (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2004), 321.
- 5 David Foster Wallace, “This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life” (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 2009.)