

Getting Started

The concluding six chapters of Revelation are possibly set up as three statements that signal the end of all things.

Ch.17-18 the final judgement of power structures

Ch.19-20 the final judgement of evil, the dragon and the unrepentant

Ch.20-21 the unveiling of heaven on earth

Together these visualize God's wrapping up his dealing with all the corrupting influences of those who oppose him. Today we deal with all the human power structures that oppose God illustrated in Babylon. John's use of Babylon is meant to apply to Rome. Whether it's Pharaoh (Egypt) or Nebuchadnezzar (Babylon) or the Caesar (Rome), they all share in common that they opposed God in their time thinking themselves the unaccountable top of the food chain. In Ch.17-18 Babylon is exposed, judged, and mourned. All human power structures aspiring to greatness, no matter the age in which they exist, must remember that they are accountable servants of the living God.

Unveiling Jesus:

Revelation is about the unveiling of Jesus. From Ch.1 onward John unveils Jesus in three significant ways. He is the Ancient of days (Rev. 1), and the Lion of Judah and the slain Lamb (Rev. 5). Although Jesus' name rarely appears in direct fashion, we hear his voice and we see him through the constant references to the Lamb.

Rev. 16:15 gives us an interesting glimpse of Jesus. This verse makes two points that the seven churches were to read, hear, and heed. Note the first person pronoun. This is not John speaking. Jesus the Lamb is speaking directly to the churches.

1. Jesus (the Lamb) could return at any time.

2. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keep his clothes so he avoids the shame of nakedness.

V. 15 is rooted in several NT passages, Matt. 24:32-41; Lk. 12:41-48; 1 Thess. 5:2. We are reminded that Jesus' return could come at any time. In light of this, believers are to live in a constant state of readiness for his return. What does this mean? Believers are to be vigilantly fulfilling their role as their master's servants doing his business, awaiting his return.

Remember Jesus' words to the church at Sardis 3:2, 3,

Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found you deeds completed in the sight of God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it and repent.

What had Sardis received, what had they heard, keep and repent of? In short, the truth of

the gospel. They had been taught the truth of Jesus and they were to keep what they'd been taught. They were to repent of their straying from the truth of the gospel. And then consider Jesus' remark to Sardis at the end of V.3,

Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

If you think about what Jesus says in 16:15, it's directly related to his word to Sardis, 3:2, 3

- 1. Jesus (the Lamb) could return at any time.**
- 2. stay awake and keep your clothes. (Live out your salvation. Be like Jesus)**

At this point you may wonder, how does all this relate to Ch.17 and Rome, and with Babylon the representative spirit that Rome embodied?

Think carefully about the contrast between what Jesus means about a believer keeping their spiritual clothes of righteousness on and the images used to describe Babylon (Rome) in Ch.17. It involves a little thing called spiritual discernment.

Unveiling Rome:

In Ad 95 Rome thought itself an indomitable force against which no earthly, or heavenly, challenger could stand. It ruled the world. Those, however, at the pinnacle of power seldom pay attention to history and what happened to others who once held similar privileges.

Rome was outwardly seen as a world power to be followed and envied. Its influence, architecture, thinking, philosophy and religion, splendor and progress dominated the world. But unless one peered beneath its skin, one would not readily see its true reality. Rome should've paid attention to God's revelation. Rome is only one of many "super" powers that have ruled the world. Had it done so it would have read about Egypt and Babylon, world powers that each, in their own day, encountered the living God of heaven.

In Rev 17, John wants the churches to peel back Rome's outer layers to see its heart.

John wants them to see in reality the prostitute whose charms can easily blind the eyes of people, and sensibilities of the kings of the world. And lacking discernment, at least 5 of the 7 churches were prostituting their true faith and position as priests to the living God. How important it is that we discern carefully what we see around us from God's point of view.

As Jesus said to the church at Sardis,

So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it and repent.

The Core:

Babylon the great:

Rev 16:19 talks about the fall of the great city Babylon. And in Ch 17, one of the angels asks John to observe the special attention given to its destruction. But why should John in AD 95 pay special attention to the destruction of a great city that fell to the Persian King Cyrus 600 years earlier?

Babylon the city

1. It rose from obscurity as a minor administrative center in 2000 BC to a world center.
2. At one time Babylon ruled over the kings of the earth.
3. It became the center of world trade and merchandise.
4. It was a major religious center.
5. It's where God's people were held in captivity and commanded to worship its gods.

Babylon challenges God

Daniel 1-6 give us ample evidence concerning Nebuchadnezzar's and Belshazzar's treatment of God's people. Daniel's 3 friends were bound and cast into the furnace because they refused to worship the image Nebuchadnezzar erected. When the 3 Jewish lads refused to bow (Dan 3:13), he went into a rage. His final thought prior to casting the lads into the furnace is powerful, "and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?" His words virtually mirror Pharaoh's attitude when Moses' demand Israel be released to worship God (Ex 5:2). Interestingly, Egypt and Babylon's stories both end the same way. The leaders are humbled and the nations disappear as a world power.

How does this affect Revelation? Babylon, like Egypt before it, represents the evil arrogance of human government that stands against God. Rev 17 is important because it details God's response to the evil city of Rome, a city like Babylon, or a place like Egypt.

Ch 17 breaks down into three parts, the vision of the harlot, the interpretation of the vision, and the judgement of God through the Lamb upon the harlot and the beast.

17:1-7 the Harlot

The language describing Babylon/Rome is graphic and raw. As modern interpreters we speculate the identity of harlot and the kings that rise and fall. We crave to know the future and its minute detail. But this misses the intended impact on the churches that heard it in their worship services. Like so much of Revelation, Ch 17 paints for its readers' vivid images that jolt the senses to reality and action.

Eugene Peterson provides an especially interesting view on what happening in V.1-7,

"Faith is rooted in history and grounded in geology.' Whether it is Egypt, Babylon, Rome, or some other human government that stands against the principles of God's sovereign reign and instruction, we stand together in a long line of history. . . 'The Great Whore symbol of everyday experience is a very nice city to

live in. The woman and the scarlet beast on which she sits comprise the streets we walk daily, the shops where we buy our vegetables while making small talk with the proprietor.”

Peterson’s idea is simple,

1. Christians have been facing the spirit of the Great Harlot for millennias and generations.
2. We see one thing, God sees another. Believers in every generation must open their eyes to the reality of their surroundings. As Peterson says,

“... in Revelation 17-18, the Great Whore image is not about sex, it is a metaphor for worship gone wrong. St John says nothing about the sexual conditions in the late first century; his business is with the conditions of faith. His pastoral responsibility is to prevent his Christians from quitting the enduringly arduous life of worship in favor of something which appears just as religious, looks a lot better, and is a lot easier. He tells them about the Great Whore, to open their eyes to the differences between the worship of the Lamb and this other worship, which is not worship at all, but keeps us from worship.”

This is what Christ called the churches to in Ch 2 & 3. They were to pay attention to and repent concerning the object of their worship. If Satan can cause believers to lose proper perspective they’ll engage in behavior that counters their true position in Christ. In Ephesus this looked like leaving their first love; in Pergamum, and Thyatira, entertaining false teaching; in Sardis, being stumbling blocks, and immorality, spiritual deadness; in Laodicea, materialism. In Ch 2 & 3 false ungodly worship infiltrates and influences these churches. The problem is that it doesn’t necessarily look or feel that way. Especially when a prostitute lulls one into submission. In ch 17 Rome’s mask is ripped off so they can see the hideous reality of their consort. John does not hold back. John’s accusations are two,

- A. This Great Whore brazenly and unashamedly leads the way in influencing many into false worship (17:1-5).
- B. This Great Whore has harmed God’s people (17:6).

V.8-13 the Interpretation

As with the identity of the Harlot, our eyes and minds race over the text to make historical connections. Where in history did this happen? Can we see it happening today? What does this say about the future? Both Caird and Keener demonstrate the pitfalls of trying to delve too deeply into history to precisely connect our prophetic schemes, especially regarding the kings described in V.9-12.

The presence of seven kings plus one is intriguing. Given John’s already established a symbolic use of the number seven, it is not unreasonable to think that he’s aiming not at a precise chronology of specific kings that one can pinpoint in history. Rather John gives an overview of the reign of human kings to see their continual connection to the beast. John’s point is that the churches faithful endurance under oppressive, anti-God rule is going to be tested, the time will be short, and it will have bounds.

The rise of the eighth king is interesting. No precise identification is given, but many scholars think this is either Nero, or Domitian. Neither Emperor treated Christians with any sense of dignity. Metzger notes that Roman historian Tacitus records,

“a vast multitude of Christians were not only put to death, but put to death with insult. They were either clothed in the skins of wild beasts and then exposed in the arena to the attacks of half-famished dogs, or else dipped in tar and put on crosses to be set on fire, and, when the daylight failed, to be burned as lights by night.”

Further, Tacitus’ observes that,

“Nero’s persecution of Christians was so terrible that even non-Christian citizens were horrified and began to intercede in their behalf.”

V.14-18 the Judgement/Downfall

John’s point is to highlight those who make war against the Lamb. But there is a strong ray of hope in an otherwise landscape. The Lamb will overcome them. How so? By remaining faithful, dying on a cross, and rising from the dead. Interestingly, the churches were called to overcome their adversaries the same way. The beast and his allies wage war against the Lamb by waging war against his people. But if the Lamb can overcome these hideous determined enemies, so can the Lamb’s followers. The Lamb overcomes his enemies precisely because of who he is, “and those who are with him are the chosen and faithful.”

Interestingly, Ezekiel (Ezek. 26:7) notes that the Babylonian king referred to himself as “king of kings”. Human rulers often take on honorific titles that elevate themselves well above others. V.14 places the honorific title where it should be properly placed. Remember that above Jesus’ head on the cross of Calvary was placed a sign which read, “King of the Jews”. This was meant to mock him. Here there is no mockery. We see him for who he really is.

And he isn’t alone. He brings an army of people, the faithful, the chosen.

Can you think of a more convicting statement for the churches to hear? I can’t imagine a single church that, in theory, would not jump at the prospect of being so named. For at least 5 of the churches though, 17:14 would have brought shame.

Paramount in these verses is that some kind of internal conflict will cause this entire unholy alliance to turn on and consume itself. This is in accordance with God’s judgement. Ironically what brought Rome to its knees was not a foreign invasion. Rome buckled from the inside as moral decay, debauchery, and excess ate away at it like a cancer. In the end, Rome got what its gods and spiritual foundation gave them – spiritual bankruptcy and collapse. As Peterson points out,

“In Whore-worship they got everything they wanted, their lives overflowed with things, (17:1-13) and now it is gone, (17:14-18) wasted, up in smoke. They are bereft of everything they were promised and invested in and enjoyed. It is not their businesses that have collapsed, but their religion, a religion of self-indulgence,

of getting it. Now it is gone: salvation-by-checkbook is gone, god-on-demand is gone, meaning-by-money is gone, religion-as-a feeling is gone, self-as-(temporary)-god is gone. They are left with nothing but themselves, of whom after a lifetime in the whorehouse, they know nothing.”

Making it real:

John’s point is to shine a light of clarity on the reality of what can become of human government. Are we to foster a deep uneasy suspicion of all human government? Not generally speaking. But we must make sure that we’re constantly living with eyes wide open. So John shines a harsh light of reality on the system into which at least a number of the churches had bought. If these churches ignore Christ’s revelation they will reap for themselves a whirlwind of judgement from God.

How do we respond to Government when it asks us to accept things that are clearly against God’s covenant relationship with us? Will we keep our clothes on? Will we continue to live out our faith in Christ regardless of response by human government? Think about Christians around the world suffering because they continue to wear their clothes of righteousness without regard for their lives.

John simply helps us to think soberly about the “nice” world we live in. We cannot always see what bubbles below the surface. So there are sobering questions every believer, every priest that serves the living God in the context of the church must ask when dealing with human governments, what am I buying into? And, what is the true cost? There is in Ch 17 a critical opportunity for every believer to look deeper than the surface to probe the heart. I cannot imagine what those who came to church thought about their worship and discipleship as this passage was read in their presence that Sunday in AD 95. Could a clear line have been drawn in the sand? Let John’s words in 17:14 echo through your heart again,

“These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with him are called the chosen and faithful.”