

THE MOTHER OF ALL HARLOTS

The title for this morning's lesson, *The Mother of All Harlots* may be a little shocking or offensive to some people but some of you are aware that it actually comes from the Bible. In fact, I took that from our text for the NTS we have been doing this week. It's found in Revelation 17:5. I don't know of any Bible scholar or expositor who thinks that this was speaking about an actual woman, or harlot. All are agreed that it is a symbol, as are many of the things mentioned throughout this book. The question is, what does she symbolize and what are people today supposed to take from this part of this wonderful but mysterious book called Revelation.

Before we get into that lesson, I've asked brother Denny to lead us singing #26, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way."

If we had the time this morning, which we do not, what I would like to do is to do a thorough review of what we have read and seen thus far in Revelation, especially since getting to chapter 12. The problem is, if we did that, we wouldn't have any time for this morning's lesson. So I want to ask your forgiveness, especially if you have not been studying Revelation with us, because it might seem like someone has dropped you off in a strange neighborhood in the dark of night.

If you will, please be turning in your Bibles to Revelation, chapter 17. In this chapter John is shown something that verse 6 caused him to marvel greatly. I believe the KJV leaves a little bit of a wrong impression when it translates that as "I wondered with great admiration." There is no doubt John was blown away by what he saw, but I don't think he had any admiration for this woman who was drunk on the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus.

What John saw, what caused him to marvel greatly is related for us in verse 1. John is told that he is going to be shown—and it is very important that you see this—the judgment of the great prostitute seated on many waters. He wasn't just being shown a vision of this woman, but of the judgment of this woman who sits upon many waters. We are going to learn in a little while what is meant by those "many waters" but verse 2 tells us that this is also the woman with whom "the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality," and who has "led the people on earth to become drunk with the wine of her immorality."

So John is carried away in the spirit, into "a wilderness" (not the wilderness of chapter 12 into which the woman clothed with the sun and who gave birth to the man child/Christ fled for safety). When he gets there, he sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, and from the description given, it becomes immediately obvious that this is the same beast as was described in chapter 13, the beast that rose up from the sea. (Now perhaps you see why I wish we had the time to go back and explain all of this and give visitors a sense of what is being shown to us!)

The woman is adorned with scarlet and purple, gold jewels and pearls, and holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication. And now, in **verse 5**, we get our first clue as to who she is, what she symbolizes. John says on her head was written a name: *“Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.”* And John says, *“I saw that she was drunk on the blood of the saints and of the martyrs of Jesus.”*

John is blown away by what he saw, and so the angel asks, *“Why do you marvel at this?”* He then explains to John, beginning in verse 8, the mystery of this woman sitting on this beast that has seven heads and ten horns. The beast, he says, is the *“beast that was and is not,”* and is the one that is about to rise up out of the bottomless pit, or abyss and go to destruction.

And, as was said of that beast that rose up out of the sea, the whole world marvels at this beast and follows it wherever it goes. He is also worshiped as people realize that no one can fight and prevail against this beast. I tried to explain that this beast symbolized ungodly political and government authority. In John’s day, that was Roman authority, but the symbol is just as applicable to the ungodly governments and rulers today.

At that point John actually learns what thus far we have only guessed at, and that is the identity of the beast on which the harlot is sitting. **Verses 9-13** tell us that he is told:

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. 12) 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.

Okay, so what do we learn from that? We learn that the beast with the seven heads is seven mountains. Mountains in the scripture are often used as symbols for kings, or kingdoms, and that is what is meant here. John is told, the seven heads are seven mountains, and **verse 10** says, *“and they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other is yet to come.”* So the seven heads of the beast upon which the harlot sits, represent seven mountains which represents seven kings or kingdoms. So it looks like the thesis we have presented is correct. That first beast, the one rising up out of the sea, represents governmental authorities that are hostile towards God and His people.

Now the angel goes on to tell John more about the ten horns, which he says also represents ten additional kings. We probably do not need not take that number literally; it is symbolic of all the ungodly kings and kingdoms that are to come.

All of these kings, or kingdoms, John is told, in verse 13, are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. That is, regardless of who or where the political,

governmental authority is, they basically all do the same things. They make war on the lamb. Keep in mind that is what the dragon was described as doing. Last week we learned why the dragon, or the devil, is trying to destroy us; why He tried to destroy Christ. And now we learn how he goes about doing that. When necessary, he uses simple brute force!

But I love **verse 14**, which was one of our memory verses. John is told, that those kings and the beast *“make war on the lamb, but 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.”*

Then the angel said to John, *“The waters you saw, where the harlot is seated,” those are people, and multitudes and nations and languages.* In other words, the waters upon which the harlot was seated represent the people of the world, who in some way support or sustain the harlot. So you have the kings and authorities that are connected to the harlot and you have the people of the world who support and sustain her lifestyle. But the angel says, the beast and the kings, they will hate her, and the time is coming when they will make her desolate and naked, and they will devour her flesh, and burn her with fire. And they will do this, the angel tells John, because God has put it into their heart to carry out his purposes, which speaks about the strange providence of God. As we sang just a little while ago, “God moves in a mysterious way!”

And then finally we learn, verse 18, who or what this woman, this harlot is. She is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the world. In the opinion of many scholars this is a prophetic reference to Rome itself.

Now let’s stop and think about what the prophecy of Revelation might have been saying; saying first of all to the people of John’s day, and saying to all the saints who have lived since that time, on down to the present time.

First of all there is a war being waged against everything that is good and holy and right and true, a war against God himself. The outcome of that war is already settled, and as 12:12 tells us, the devil *“knows that his time is short!”* Peter reminds us that each of us have an adversary, the devil, roaming about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). We learned last week that this all started when before time began, the devil, as one of God’s angels led untold numbers of other angels in some kind of action that resulted in their being forever removed from the presence of God. The severity of that punishment has incited him to bitterness and rage, and because of that, he seeks to destroy anything associated with the wisdom or glory of God.

In order to achieve his purpose, the devil works through human agencies. That is what is behind the two beasts that are pictured for us in chapter 13, including the one who has a name, and the number of that name is 666. The one beast that we have already talked about, the one rising up out of the sea (the masses of humankind) symbolized ungodly governmental authority. The second beast that rises up from the earth and looks like a lamb, symbolizes false religion. Several times in other places, he is referred to as the false prophet.

Well in chapter 17 we learn that the devil actually employs yet one more ally, symbolized by the harlot. The harlot symbolizes Babylon which is itself a symbol for Rome, the city and seat of the empire, and that city symbolizes all of the corruption, greed, and the love of money and sinful pleasures that always comes when God is pushed aside by political powers and misrepresented by whatever religions happen to be present. In John's day you could not find a most striking example of that than in the city of Rome itself. I am sure there were a lot of other cities throughout the world at that time that could have fit the description as well, but none fit it more appropriately than did the city of Rome.

Rome represented power but it also represented moral and ethical decadence. It is not possible in the time we have this morning to talk about all of the vile and corrupt and ungodly things for which Rome came to be known. Edward Gibbon is the 18th century author of a 6-volumen series entitled *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He researched and wrote about the five or six hundred years that Rome, as an empire was in its ascendancy and decline, and he identified a number of reasons for its decline but at the heart of that decline was its moral and spiritual failures. From his work, someone has summarized five marks of the decaying empire.

1. Concern with displaying affluence instead of building wealth
2. Obsession with sex and perversions of sex
3. Art becomes freakish and sensationalistic instead of creative and original
4. Widening disparity between very rich and very poor
5. Increased demand to live off the state.

Need we say any more about the implications of that for our own time and society?

In a very real way, Rome became a harlot. She represented that seduction the world gave into believing that in her they would find fulfillment of all their desires. Was it power you wanted? She was the seat of the empire. Was it fame? To become a household name in Rome meant you would be recognized around the world. Was it money? Fortunes were to be made, if you knew the right people and made the right deals. Was it pleasure? In Rome, nothing would be forbidden to you.

Of course, as 1 Corinthians 6:16 teaches, one cannot go into the harlot without becoming one with her, and partake of her vileness. In another context, the writer of Proverbs talks about the folly of turning aside to the seductress. In **2:18, 19** he writes: "*For her house sinks down to death, and her paths to the departed; none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.*"

The caption at the head of chapter 18 in my Bible, and maybe yours as well says, "*The Fall of Babylon.*" You see, God had given to John a prophecy concerning the fall of Rome, both as an empire and as a city. And of course, as we know, the prophecy came true. It would be hard to

find words of lament and anguish more pitiful than the words of this chapter. Let me share some of this for you so you can get a better feel for what is going on.

8-19 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." 9) And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. 10) They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, "Alas! Alas! You great city, you mighty city, Babylon! For in a single hour your judgment has come." 11) And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, 12) cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, 13) cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls. 14) "The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your delicacies and your splendors are lost to you, never to be found again!" 15) The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, 16) "Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! 17) For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste." And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off 18) and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, "What city was like the great city?" 19) And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in a single hour she has been laid waste.

21-24 Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more; 22) and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and trumpeters, will be heard in you no more, and a craftsman of any craft will be found in you no more, and the sound of the mill will be heard in you no more, 23) and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more, and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more, for your merchants were the great ones of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. 24) And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slain on earth."

Okay, let's see if we can put together what's going on here. What was God saying to the first century saints? What is He saying to saints in the 21st century?

He is saying that the dragon that was cast down from the presence of God, he and all of his angels, is still at war with God, although he vents his wrath on you, the saints of God. He is saying that the dragon, that ancient serpent, the one we call the devil and Satan (12:9), works in three very powerful and effective ways.

- One, he works through the political and governmental forces that are operative at all times and all places. These forces believe that people's trust and worship that should only be given to God really belongs to them. At the very least, they are first and God is second. The first beast works through intimidation.
- The dragon works through perverted religious forces, that also are at work at all times and in all places. The second beast works through deception.
- And finally, the dragon works through the propensities of any given society to make wealth and pleasure the all-important priority in life. Babylon works through seduction, and that's why she is pictured as a harlot.

Let me share an excerpt from brother David Roper's commentary, which is part of the Truth For Today Commentary, and an excellent resource for your study. It is available in the church's library. In his comments about chapter 17, and Babylon, brother Roper says:

"Babylon had a unique place in the devil's plan: She is Satan's third ally. The first ally was the sea beast, usually called "the beast"; the second was the land beast, also called "the false prophet"; Babylon the great is the third. "The beast," which was symbolic of the Roman Empire, represented one approach the devil uses; intimidation. The false prophet, which symbolized the agencies that enforced emperor worship, represented a second approach used by Satan: deception. Babylon the great represents a third approach: seduction."

"A person's heart or innermost being is made up of intellect, emotion and will. The devil tries to bend an individual's will with intimidation. If that does not succeed, he tries to cloud the person's intellect with deception. If, however, an individual is too stubborn to yield to his pressure and too sensible to believe his lies, he does not give up: He still has Babylon the great, who will appeal to the dark side of that individual's emotions. She will try to seduce—and she succeeds more often that she fails."

Rome of course is no more. Oh, there's still a Rome, but it is no longer the center of the world. It no longer holds much power or influence over what men think or do, except of course through what that false prophet whose headquarters is in Rome continues to spew out.

No, the influence of Rome, as the mother of all harlots, is gone, but a hundred other harlots have arisen to take her place. And the dragon continues to wage war against the saints through a subtle but powerful blend of seduction, that overwhelm the will more powerfully than any army or police force ever could, that cloud the mind more completely than any false teacher ever did. People today are still hearing and they are still giving in to the siren calls of the great whore—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life."

But keep this in mind, what John was shown, and what he passed on to his readers, in what we call chapter 18 was her judgment by the God of heaven and earth.

Truly as Solomon said, "*none who go to her come back, nor do they regain the paths of life.*"

You came here to worship God this morning. I hope you have done that. I hope that when you leave here that you know you have been in God's presence and that He has not only invited you to worship Him, but to also learn from Him as well. I hope all of you are leaving here as a child of God, and that you are faithfully walking with Him in every way. If you are not a child of God, or if you have been once again walking in the darkness, let me encourage you this morning to hear God as he continues to call you. He wants you to leave here as one of His children, and determined that you are going to walk with Him in the light of His word.

Invitation