

# Lesson 38

Let's begin today with a question. Satan is just as active today as he was in the first century, and Satan has very powerful tools today just as he did then. The Internet, for example, is a very powerful tool for Satan. Why isn't God doing today with Satan's modern tools what he did with Rome in the first century?

My response is what makes us think God is not doing today what he was doing with Rome in the first century. Certainly we are not receiving a vision as John did, but we don't need another vision — we already have the vision we read about in Revelation.

A key purpose of this book of Revelation is to tell the church how God deals with the enemies of his people. And, as we have seen, this book is describing a **spiritual** deliverance of God's people and a **spiritual** judgment of the enemies of God's people. That is still how things work today, two thousand years later. We are not awaiting a **physical** deliverance from our problems, and neither are we anticipating a **physical** judgment of the church's enemies.

If we remain faithful unto death, we will receive a crown of life just as the first century Christians did. Those who die as enemies of God will receive wrath and indignation just as the Romans did in the first century when they died.

Why didn't God miraculously deliver his people from the mouth of the Roman lion? Why didn't God miraculously rain fire and brimstone down upon Rome? Perhaps it was because, in that final book of the Bible, God wanted the church to know how God was going to deal with his people and with the enemies of his people *after* the age of miracles came to an end, which happened shortly after this book was written.

But Rome did eventually fall. Yes, and nations rise and fall today as well — but that does not happen due to random or earthly forces.

***Romans 13:1** — Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*

God raises up earthly powers as God sees fit, and God removes earthly powers as God sees fit. "The most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will" (Daniel 4:25). That has always been true, and that is not the miraculous in action, but rather that is God's providence in action.

Perhaps the greatest lesson we can take from this wonderful book of Revelation is the lesson of how God deals today with the church and with the forces of evil opposed to the church. The church is to remain faithful unto death; the world is to repent and obey the gospel or face eternal death; the nations and rulers of this world are to align themselves with the principles in God's word or face the consequences. That is how things worked with Rome — and isn't that exactly how things still work today?

## Chapter 17

### **Revelation 17:1-2**

**1 And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: 2 With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.**

In verse 1, one of the seven angels tells John that he will show him “the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters.” This harlot, like Jezebel in the Old Testament, has been actively seeking to murder God's people. But, also like Jezebel, this harlot has now been judged, and we are about to see the details of that judgment. Who is this great harlot?

Do you remember taking math classes in school where some of the answers were given in the back of the textbook? Usually it was the answers to the even numbered problems or the odd numbered problems. Why did the author of the textbook do that? So you could work those problems and test yourself to see if you were on the right track. Having the answers to the even numbered problems helped you learn the material and it helped you work the odd numbered problems, and have confidence in your answers.

For the symbols in verses 1-6, we have the answers right here in the text. They are not at the end of the book, but rather they are at the end of the chapter. We don't have to work out what these symbols mean because the inspired text tells us exactly what they mean.

Before we look in the back of the chapter, however, we should look at the symbols ourselves and ask what we think they mean. If what we think they mean matches with what the text tells us they mean, then that is a pretty good indication that we are on the right track with the many symbols that are not explained in the back of the book!

One more thing — Chapter 17 confirms without any doubt that this book contains symbols. This chapter confirms without any doubt that the approach of the so-called “rigid literalists” is dead wrong. The first half of this chapter shows us symbols, and the second half of the chapter shows us what those symbols mean — many of which are used all throughout this book.

So back to our question: Who is this great harlot? And, also, what does it mean in verse 1 that she is seated upon many waters?

Again, without yet checking the inspired answers to those two questions, wouldn't we expect this harlot to be Rome? Wouldn't we expect the judgment of this great harlot to be the judgment of Rome? Hasn't this book been describing the judgment of Rome up to this point? Are we expecting a sudden change of subject?

And as for the waters, haven't we already seen the restless nations of the world represented by the sea? Wouldn't it make sense for the waters here to mean the same thing? We'll see in a moment whether those two answers are correct. An angel sent from God is about to grade our homework!

Verse 2 tells us that the kings of the earth have committed fornication with this harlot. What that means is that these kings have been her customers. These kingdoms have joined in with Rome and are on Rome's side — some voluntarily, but others not.

In the Old Testament, disobedient cities were often called harlots.

- In *Isaiah 23:17*, we read that Tyre “shall commit fornication with all the kingdoms of the world upon the face of the earth.”
- In *Nahum 3:4*, Nineveh's sins are described as “the multitude of the whoredoms of the wellfavoured harlot, the mistress of witchcrafts, that selleth nations through her whoredoms.”

- In *Isaiah 1:21*, Jerusalem is described this way: “How is the faithful city become an harlot! it was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers.”
- *Ezekiel 16:15* says this of Jerusalem: “But thou didst trust in thine own beauty, and playedst the harlot because of thy renown, and pouredst out thy fornications on every one that passed by.”

Here the city that is being described is not Tyre, Nineveh, or Jerusalem, but is Rome. Rome, like those Old Testament examples, had made treacherous and deceitful relationships with other nations and with false gods all aimed at harming God’s people.

Rome was very much like a harlot. Rome was deceitful and immoral, and, as with a harlot, Rome not only sinned, but Rome caused other people to sin as well. That is what the second half of verse 2 tells us: “the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication.” If sin was the disease, Rome was a carrier intent on infecting the entire world.

Rome had become a great force for evil in the world. Rome, like a harlot, sold its merchandise of sin and evil all throughout the world, causing many people to sin. And was Rome the last nation to specialize in exporting evil all throughout the world? Hardly. I bet we can think of a modern example. The United States exports many things, some good and some not. We need to make sure that the church continues to export the gospel. That is what the world needs to receive.

### **Revelation 17:3-6**

**3 So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. 4 And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: 5 And upon her forehead was a name**

**written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. 6 And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.**

In verses 1-2, the angel told John what he was about to do. In verse 3, the angel does it — he carries John away in the spirit into the wilderness so that John can see the judgment of the great harlot.

What does the phrase “in the spirit into the wilderness” mean? We saw the phrase “in the spirit” all the way back in Revelation 4:2, and it just means that John is seeing a vision. John is not physically being carried away; he is being spiritually carried away.

Why in the wilderness? That reference to a wilderness in verse 3 is a reminder of something we see often in the Bible. Over and over again, we see men such as Moses, Elijah, and John the Baptist meeting God in the wilderness. There in the wilderness the distractions go away, and the people of God are able to focus on the things that matter. Jesus frequently withdrew into the wilderness, leaving a perfect example for his people. If our lives are too busy and too noisy to hear the voice of God in his word, then perhaps we need to go out into the wilderness to commune with God (which might just mean simply turning off our TV and our phone for an hour or so!).

Another reason to mention the wilderness in verse 3 is to remind us of another woman we have seen in this book. In Chapter 12 the people of God were depicted as a woman chased into the wilderness by an angry dragon. The woman John sees here in Chapter 17 is also in the wilderness, but this woman in Chapter 17 is totally different from the woman in Chapter 12.

Once we again, we are presented with a great contrast between that which is true and that which is false. Caesar or Christ? The great harlot or the bride of the Lamb? The royal priesthood of Rome or the royal priesthood of God? That is the choice that has been ringing all throughout this book. Choose ye this day! That very well may be the primary theme of this book!

The woman in verse 3 is the great harlot from verse 1. In verse 3, we see that she is not just sitting on many waters, but she is also sitting “upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.”

What are the seven heads and the ten horns? We will receive inspired answers to those questions later in this same chapter, but we already know that they represent something having to do with royalty and with kings. We have seen this image twice before in this book, and each time we have delayed our discussion until we got to Chapter 17.

***Revelation 12:3** — And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and **seven crowns** upon his heads.*

***Revelation 13:1** — And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns **ten crowns**, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.*

Those earlier descriptions link these seven heads and these ten horns with royalty. Also, verse 3 tells us that this beast is “scarlet coloured,” and verse 4 tells us that the harlot is dressed in purple and scarlet. Those are the colors of royalty. In fact, Matthew 27:28 tells us that when the Roman soldiers mocked Jesus as king, they “put a scarlet robe on him.” John tells us that the robe was also purple (John 19:2). Those Roman soldiers are about to find out who really wears the crown! And it is not a crown of thorns!

Also, the description we just read from Revelation 13:1 confirms that the beast we are seeing here in Chapter 17 is the beast from the sea. That explains how the harlot can be sitting both on the waters and on the beast. And, as we said back in Chapter 13, this beast from the sea represents the royal side of Rome.

In verse 4, we see that the harlot is not only dressed in purple and scarlet, but she is also arrayed with gold, jewels, and pearls. These images denote her power, her wealth, her royalty, and her beauty — at least in earthly terms. And all of that was true of Rome from an earthly perspective. Rome was powerful in earthly terms. Rome was royal in earthly terms. Rome was rich in earthly terms. Rome was beautiful in earthly terms. But Rome’s account in heaven was overdrawn!

If a kingdom such as Rome held out a golden cup to the rest of the world, then surely that golden cup must be full of blessings, right? Wrong! Verse 4 tells us

that Rome's golden cup was "full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication."

But do you know what? If the people of that day had wanted to find a kingdom that was truly powerful, and truly wealthy, and truly royal, and truly beautiful — they could have easily found such a kingdom. But that kingdom was not Rome or any other earthly kingdom. That kingdom was and is the eternal kingdom of Christ, the church of Christ. The church was infinitely more powerful than Rome, infinitely more wealthy than Rome, infinitely more royal than Rome, and infinitely more beautiful than Rome. Rome didn't see things that way, but things are not always what they seem! What matters is not how the world sees Rome and the church. What matters is how God sees Rome and the church, and that is what this book is all about.

The golden cup in verse 5 is an allusion back to a description of ancient Babylon found in Jeremiah.

*Jeremiah 51:7 — Babylon hath been a golden cup in the Lord's hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are mad.*

God made Babylon a world power so that God could use Babylon to further his own purposes on this earth. Likewise, God made Rome a world power so that God could use Rome to further his own purposes on this earth. In that way, God gave each of them a golden cup with which they could bless the world. Rome (unintentionally, no doubt) used its golden cup that way for a time as the Roman peace allowed the gospel to spread across the known world, but by the time of this book Rome was using its God given golden cup for something entirely different — Rome was using its God given position to spread abominations and filthiness all across the world.

Were Babylon and Rome the last nations to receive great blessings from God, but then to use those great blessings to spread abominations and filthiness across the world? No. Again, I bet we can think of a modern example of such a nation.

In verse 5, we see that the harlot wears a name on her forehead: "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH."

The first thing this name tells us about this harlot is that she had absolutely no shame in what she was doing. She was proud of what she was doing. So

proud in fact that she wrote it on her forehead so that everyone could read it. If she had ever known how to blush, those days were long gone.

There is a historical connection with this description of the harlot. A Roman prostitute in a public brothel wore a frontlet upon her forehead that displayed her name to the customers. That way she could get their return business.

In fact, there may be an even more specific historical allusion here. The Roman Empress Messalina was the wife of the Emperor Claudius, who preceded Nero. Have you ever met someone in authority and wondered how he got there — and then you met his wife and you understood? That may have been the case with Claudius. The historian Suetonius described Claudius in this way: “His knees were weak and gave way under him and his head shook. He stammered and his speech was confused. He slobbered and his nose ran when he was excited.” From that description of Claudius’ weakness, we might conclude that Messalina must have been very powerful and influential to keep them both in power, which was true — up until the time Claudius had her killed for plotting against him.

In any event, Juvenal tells us that at night Messalina would go down to the public brothels and serve there as a common prostitute. Pliny the Elder wrote that Messalina entered and won a contest in a brothel to see who could service the most customers. This description in Chapter 17 of Roman royalty as a harlot would have rung an immediate bell of recognition with anyone in Rome.

What does the name in verse 5 mean? “MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” Let’s start with the third part of the name: “THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” This is not an ordinary harlot; this is the mother of harlots. This woman runs the entire brothel! And she is intent on spreading her corruption all throughout the earth. So far, this description fits Rome perfectly.

But in case there is any doubt, we have the second part of the name: “BABYLON THE GREAT.” We know that Babylon was a code name for Rome in the first century church. How do we know that for sure? We know that from this book itself, and we also know it from First Peter.

*1 Peter 5:13 — The church that is at **Babylon**, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son.*

But maybe that is **literal** Babylon in First Peter, and maybe this is **literal** Babylon here in Revelation 17. Could that be the case? No. The Greek historian Siculus in the first century BC tells us that only a small part of ancient Babylon was inhabited in his day. Strabo the Greek geographer who died in AD 19 describes Babylon as being “in great part deserted.” Pausanias the Greek traveler and geographer of the second century declares that nothing remained of Babylon except the temple of Belus and the walls of the city. Lucian, the second century Greek sophist and satirist, said that Babylon would soon have to be searched for like Nineveh, of which not a trace remained in his day.

Is that the great city John is writing about? Of course not! It could not possibly be. In fact, Babylon in the first century fits none of the descriptions of the great city that we read about in this book.

And that simple, indisputable historical fact (that ancient Babylon is not the great city in this book) establishes beyond any doubt that no one can take everything in this book literally. The name Babylon must be intended as a symbol for something else. And once we agree that this book contains images and symbols, then under what theory do we say that Babylon in Chapter 17 is figurative but the 1000 years in Chapter 20 are literal? Babylon the Great is Rome.

What about the first part of the name — “MYSTERY”? Depending on the translation you are using, that may not even be written as part of the name. The ESV, for example, has: “And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.’” I think that is likely a better translation than the KJV. In any event, the mystery here is simply that Babylon means Rome. Mysteries in the Bible are things that were once not understood but that have now been revealed, and this mystery is no exception.

Verse 6 is a vivid and graphic description of Rome. “And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” Rome was a blood thirsty monster, and that blood thirsty monster had its sights set on the church of Christ. That monster had murdered Peter and Paul along with countless other faithful Christians. In fact, it was by bloody Roman hands that God’s son had been nailed to the cross.

And was Rome ashamed of what it had done? Was this great harlot ashamed? Hardly! She proudly displayed her name and her sins on her forehead, and she was drunk on the blood of the faithful Christians she had killed! (And there we have another lesson on sobriety to go along with the one we saw last week!)

ROME'S TIME WAS UP! ROME'S DAY WAS OVER! Rome, like ancient Babylon, had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Can anyone doubt it? "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

We should pause here to note that as bad as Rome is pictured in this book, Rome was pictured just as bad by the pagans who lived there. Tacitus called Rome "the place into which from all over the world all atrocious and shameful things flow and where they are most popular." Seneca called Rome "a filthy sewer."

**Barclay:** "This was the civilization into which Christianity came; and it was out of this that men were converted to chastity. We may well speak of the miracles of the Cross."

Yes, our own nation has taken a very sharp turn toward immorality and away from God, but we are nothing like Rome, at least not yet. We are on the path toward becoming like Rome, and we will likely get there, perhaps soon, but we are not there yet. What should we as the people of God do to slow our nation's sad decline?

*1 Timothy 2:1-4 — I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.*

We must pray for those in authority, and we must continue to proclaim the gospel. That is what Paul told Timothy with regard to Rome, and that is what Paul is telling us today as well. We need to pray and proclaim.

What does the last part of verse 6 mean? "And when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration." That is not a great choice of words in the KJV. The ESV is much better: "When I saw her, I marveled greatly." The ASV is also much better: "And when I saw her, I wondered with a great wonder." In short, John is amazed at what he has just been shown, as would anybody have been amazed at receiving such a vision. John is not *admiring* this harlot.

But John, no doubt, had many questions about what he had seen. If only an angel would appear to answer those questions and explain what the vision

means! “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” And so we have verse 7.

### **Revelation 17:7**

**7 And the angel said unto me, Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns.**

The angel asks John why he is so amazed, and then he tells John that he will explain the mystery of the woman to him and of the beast that is carrying her, with its seven heads and ten horns.

As with the mystery we saw earlier, this mystery is a mystery no longer after the angel reveals the meaning of the symbols. In fact, the angel’s question at the beginning of verse 7 suggests that maybe this woman was not that great of a mystery to begin with. After all, we seem to have done pretty well in figuring out what she represents even before studying the angel’s explanation. And I think John also by this time likely had a pretty good idea what this vision was generally all about.

Remember that this entire book started with a blessing in Revelation 1:3 for those who read and keep the words of this prophecy. This book was meant to be understood, and this book can be understood. That is a promise from God, and it is not an empty promise. God does not make empty promises or promise empty blessings. And that promise from God applies to the entire book — not just to the part of the book that is explained by this angel.

Throughout our study of Revelation we have been using the standard rule in understanding apocalyptic language: we assume the language is figurative unless we are compelled to understand it otherwise. For the remainder of Chapter 17 we are going to **reverse** that rule and interpret these verses as we do most verses in the Bible: we assume the language is literal unless we are compelled to understand it otherwise.

Why the reversal? Because this angel is explaining the apocalyptic language. This angel is stepping out of the vision to explain to John the meaning of the symbols that he is seeing. John sees seven heads — what do those heads de-

pict? The angel will tell us, and we should interpret that inspired explanation literally unless we are compelled to do otherwise.

And one more thing — we should agree with what this angel has to say! You would think that point would not need saying, but then you would be surprised by the number of commentaries on Revelation that disagree with what this angel has to tell us! When your answer differs from the answer in the back of the book, the prudent student goes back and checks his work!

### **Revelation 17:8**

**8 The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.**

We have already talked about the bottomless pit and the book of life. And we have already talked about what it means for names to be written or not to be written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. We have also already discussed this beast, which is the beast from the sea, representing the royal side of Rome. We looked at all of these symbols earlier in the book, and what we said before still applies.

Verse 8 says that the beast was and is not. And the verse tells us that the Romans wonder when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is. What does all of that mean?

We talked about that before, also. The time when “the beast was” is the time of persecution under Nero. The time when “the beast is not” is the temporary lull in persecution that occurred after the death of Nero. The time when “the beast is to come” is the resumption of persecution that occurred under Domitian.

Domitian was called a limb of the bloody Nero, and was even falsely thought by some to be Nero returned from the grave. Juvenal said that Rome under

Domitian was enslaved to a “bald-headed Nero.” Tertullian called Domitian “a man of Nero’s type of cruelty” and “a sub-Nero.” Domitian renewed the persecution against Christians that Nero had started.

In verse 8, the angel is just restating what John has seen, and what we have seen earlier in the book. The angel’s explanation begins in verse 9.

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

**9 And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. 10 And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space. 11 And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition.**

Verses 9, 10, and 11 of Chapter 17 are three of the most important verses in the entire book. In fact, when it comes to really understanding what this book of Revelation is all about, these three verses may be the most important verses in the book.

These three verses confirm with absolute certainty that this book is about Rome, and these three verses tell us when this book was written. These three verses also provide a vital link for us back to the prophecies of Daniel. As you can imagine, with that introduction, we are going to spend some time talking about these three verses!

Let’s start with some important principles of interpretation that we can glean from these verses.

First, these verses confirm that the book of Revelation contains figurative language. You wouldn’t think that statement would be controversial, but sadly it is. Some people approach this book with what they call a “rigid literalism.” These verses confirm what we already knew — that literal approach is the wrong approach. This book is filled with symbols and figurative language.

Second, these verses tell us that sometimes a symbol has two different meanings. In verse 9, we see that the seven heads are seven mountains, and in verse 10 we see that the seven heads are also seven kings. That may support the notion that other symbols in this book also have dual meanings, but we can't say for sure when the text doesn't tell us.

Third, these verses tell us that sometimes a number that is used as a symbol also has a literal meaning. For example, we have seen the number seven used all throughout this book as a symbol for perfection. But here we see the angel refer to seven mountains and seven kings, which we should take as a literal seven mountains and literal seven kings unless we find some compelling reason to understand it otherwise. Does that mean every number in this book has both a figurative and a literal meaning? No. All it means is that **some** of the numbers in this book have **both** a figurative and a literal meaning. Let's make two observations about that point.

First, this point is not new. We have seen it before. The Babylonian captivity was seventy years — and that was a literal seventy years. But God chose that number seventy for a reason — seventy denotes the perfect (seven) and complete (ten) period of time for the people of God to learn the lesson that God was teaching them.

And second, that number seventy and this number seven are not chosen at random. God chose the length of the captivity, God determined the number of these kings, and God created the seven mountains. Sometimes, and perhaps often times, when God chooses literal numbers, God chooses literal numbers that have a symbolic significance.

How can we tell when a figurative number in this book also has a literal meaning? The easiest way to tell when that happens is for us to be told by God when it is happening, and that is exactly what is happening in these verses. When we are not told that there is also a literal meaning for a number, then we should just understand the number figuratively as usual for apocalyptic language.