

The War of Worlds

Revelation 17

Derek Thomas: "The story of redemption is one of war and hostility." A brief survey of history proves that to be true.

In the opening scenes of Genesis, we find the Devil waging war against God and his creatures, destroying the innocence of the Garden with lies. And all through Scripture we see that great war unfolding:

- In the Tower of Babel, the children of men try to exalt themselves over God.
- In the days of Noah, the world was unified in its wicked rebellion against God.
- The same in the day of Abraham, seen in the evil of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- The Pharaoh of Egypt, the Philistines, the Babylonians, the Pharisees – all in their time took up the Devil's cause in their hatred of the living God and his people.

When John received these visions, that war was continuing as the Roman Empire viciously attacked the church. John was exiled to the island of Patmos for the faith. Christian men and women were being dragged to the gladiator arenas, dressed in lambskins and fed to hungry lions for sport. The early church experienced the reality of the Devil's fury and the coercive and deceptive power of his two beasts.

Millions of our brothers and sisters around the world today are experiencing the same – and I firmly believe that the flood waters of persecution are rising and about to spill over the banks of our own land. The question is: are we prepared?

David French: "In my travels around the country, one thing has become crystal clear to me. Christians are not prepared for the social consequences of the profound cultural shifts — especially in more secular parts of the nation. They're afraid to say what they believe...because they're simply not prepared for any meaningful adverse consequences in their careers or with their peers."

Denny Burk: "Pastors, are your people prepared? Are they prepared to lose their jobs for Christ? Are they prepared to be considered social pariahs for Christ? Are they willing to risk their retirement account for Christ? Are you ready for this?"

Derek Thomas quotes Lutheran theologian, **Gustaf Aulen**, who writes,

"I am persuaded that no form of Christian teaching has any future before it, unless it can keep steadily in view the reality of evil that is in the world and go to meet that evil with a battle song of triumph."

That is exactly what Jesus is teaching us in these chapters — the reality of evil and the battle song of triumph. In the remaining chapters of this book we see not only the reality of the Devil’s war against Christ, but the glorious reality of Christ’s war against the Devil, and his complete victory over him.

- In chapter 17, Jesus teaches us specifically about the harlot of Babylon, the immoral spirit of the age.
- In chapter 18, we will see her judgement and the grief of the world.
- In chapter 19, the triumphant songs of the saints and the marriage supper of the Lamb.
- In chapters 20-22, the same story is told, with even more beauty and clarity. The Devil is judged, and Jesus reveals his bride in a new heaven and new earth.

No matter how difficult the battle becomes, the story ends very, very well!

The book of Revelations closes with visions of two contrasting women.

Rev. 17:1 *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...”*

Rev. 21:9 *Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.”*

In these visions there are also two opposing cities. In chapter 17 we see the perverse glamour of the idolatrous city of Babylon. In chapter 21 we read of “the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God.”

Jesus has given us these contrasting realities to fix in our mind this fundamental divide between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness; between the citizens of Babylon, which is of the earth, and the citizens of the new Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven. Specifically, our Lord wants us to see and understand the purposes of God in this world, revealed in the destiny of these two women, these two cities. His purpose is to judge the prostitute and to redeem and glorify the Bride.

The vision of chapter 17 is a vision of judgment. The angel introduces the vision by saying, “Come, I will show you the *judgment* of the great prostitute.” We are first shown the woman (vv. 1-6). Then, beginning with verse 7, we are told of the beast on whom she rides and the destruction that they will experience.

I. The Great Prostitute

A. Her Immorality

Before the angel reveals the vision to John, he tells him what he is about to see. And the woman he describes is defined by perversion. In the first 5 verses, there is some version of the word *porne* – from which we get the word *porn* or *pornography*. The woman's name is "πόρνης". The kings of the earth commit *porneusan* with her and drink the wine of her "πορνείας".

The perversion is not only sexual. In the Bible, the physical perversion of sexual immorality is the outward sign of the inner perversion of spiritual idolatry.

- When Israel worshiped the false gods of the surrounding nations, God accused them of spiritual adultery – they had betrayed their covenant relation with the Lord, their spiritual husband.
- In Romans 1, God reveals his wrath concerning the **spiritual** perversion of godless men by giving them over to **sexual** perversion, specifically homosexuality. They are given over to their lusts, violating their own bodies – manifesting the violence they have already committed against their soul.

And so, what we are meant to see here in the great prostitute, is not only a sexual perversion, but a fundamental **spiritual** one which bears sexual and other perverse fruit. For instance, in chapter 18 we will see that a defining perversion of this prostitute was her rank materialism. And here, in chapter 17 we already see the combination of deviance and luxury of this woman.

- She is arrayed in purple (the color of royalty) and scarlet (the color of the Great Red Dragon – the Devil).
- She is adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls (representing material wealth, glamor).
- She holds in her hand a golden cup (a sign of opulence), full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.

The prostitute is defined by this combination of material wealth and sexual perversion.

Eric Alexander: During the 1950s many thought that the great prostitute was represented by the evil of communism. But, he said, this strikes me as much more descriptive of western capitalism.

We don't think of materialism as an evil like sexual sin, but to live for material wealth is just as spiritually perverse as to live for immoral pleasures. It's just another form of idolatry, another way of ignoring God and failing to love him and live for him.

The greatest seduction of the great prostitute is usually economic. This was true for the early church. They were being tempted to participate in the pagan practices of the trade guilds in order to avoid the economic hardship of being expelled. When persecution comes to us, in earnest, we will see that the hardest challenges for American Christians will be the loss of material things: jobs, homes, retirement accounts.

B. Her Identity

Rev. 17:5 *And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."*

In the first century, every Christian would recognize the name and the symbolism. Babylon, historically, was the capital city of the great Assyrian empire. Babylon was the great persecutor of God's people, carrying them into exile. But in the first century, Babylon, metaphorically, was Rome. Rome was the new world power and the persecutor of God's people.

For example, in Peter's first epistle, he writes:

1 Peter 5:13 *"She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings."*

In other words, "the church in Rome sends you greetings."

The association of Babylon with Rome is also seen in verse 9, in reference to the beast:

Rev. 17:9 *This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated;*

Rome was famously known as the city on seven hills. The early church saw Rome as Babylon, the great, wealthy, perverse prostitute who spoke blasphemy against God and persecuted his church.

But while ancient Rome certainly was an expression of the great prostitute, it does not exhaust the symbol. The great prostitute has been in the world ever since the fall of Adam and Eve. It is the evil spirit of this age, the demonic spirit of this world.

1 John 2:16 *For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.*

The things this world loves and applauds and pursues and desires and boasts of – money, sex, fame, power, beauty, human ability — are **"not from the Father."** Then who are they from? They're from the prostitute, *"the mother of earth's abominations."* They're from the beast and the dragon – the Devil himself. Notice in verse 3, the woman is sitting on a scarlet

beast that is “full of blasphemous names.” This is the same beast of chapter 13, the Devil’s helper. She is so intricately associated with the beast on whom she rides that the two are nearly indistinguishable. The spirit of the world is formed in the image and driven by the power of the beast.

The key point is the perversion, the abomination, the impurity. The prostitute, which is the spirit of this world, is deeply offensive to God and ripe for judgement.

C. Her Influence

Her influence is pervasive, universal, and seemingly inescapable.

She is “seated on many waters” (v. 1), which is interpreted in verse 15 as “the peoples, multitudes, and nations and languages.” She “has dominion over kings of the earth” (v. 18). Her influence is universal. There is no corner of creation where her perversion and power are not manifest.

Rev. 17:8 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.

And so does the apostle! “When I saw her, I marveled greatly” (v. 6). She is impressive and intimidating! She seems overpowering, overwhelming, and invincible. She is “drunk with the blood of the saints the martyrs of Jesus” (v. 6). She seems to take as she pleases, destroy as she wills. How can the poor little church of Jesus possibly endure her assault when all the world is in love with her and the evil on which she rides seems all-powerful?

You can sense the force of this power already. The world around us does not simply disagree with the Bible’s teaching on sexuality – it increasingly despises those who hold to that teaching. What will you do when everyone around you sees you as evil because you refuse to go along with the spirit of the age?

II. The Mystery

Rev. 17:7 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.”

When the Bible speaks of “mystery” it doesn’t mean what we mean. We mean something that we can’t figure out, like what happens to missing socks. Where do they go? It’s a mystery. No one knows. But mystery in biblical usage is something that *used* to be unclear, but now has been made known. There are **two things** that are being made clear in these following verses: the certainty of a final battle and the victory of the Lamb.

A. The Certainty of a Final Battle

As the end of time draws near there will be an intense, unified war against the church. There are many evidences of this in the text:

- v. 8 *"The beast was, is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit."* In other words, the Devil was, in a sense, at loose in the world (*he was*). And then Christ came, defeated the Devil, and is now restraining his power so that the church can be gathered (*he is not*). But the Devil will be allowed to come from the abyss and attack the church in a final battle. (*He is about to rise...*)
- v. 10 speaks of an 8th king that is *"not yet come,"* but he is coming.
- v. 12 speaks of 10 kings, 10 being the number of power. They will receive authority (from God), together with the beast, for one hour. There will be a great unified attack on the church as the world's powers are combined *"with one mind"* to do the will of the beast (v. 13).
- v. 14 *"They will make war on the Lamb..."*

Jesus wants us to understand that, though the spirit of perversion and persecution has always been present in this world, there will be a final, unified, manifestation of that spirit for a brief time – one hour. We aren't told when this great, final battle will take place. If Jesus had thought we needed to know he would have told us. But he does tell us what we need to know. There is a battle coming. And he wants us to be ready. But he also wants us to be absolutely confident.

B. The Victory of Christ

The text is saturated with reminders of the Devil's demise.

v. 8 – the beast will arise from the bottomless pit ***"and go to destruction."***

v. 11 – Repeated, nearly word for word, the beast ***"goes to destruction."***

v. 14 ***"They will make war on the Lamb – and the Lamb will conquer them!"***

In verses 16-17 we are shown that God will even use the Devil's own powers against himself. The powers of the earth and the beast will come to hate the prostitute and destroy her.

Why?

Rev. 17:17 *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.*

Not only does Jesus win, but every event of this battle is in his sovereign hand! When the world seduces and persecutes the church, it may seem like the world is carrying out its purposes – and in one sense it is. The beast is at work, making war on the saints. But Jesus

wants us to see behind the scenes. Ultimately, every single event is “according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11).

But let me return, as we close, to the glory and wonder of v. 14!

Rev. 17:14 *They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them...*

How can we be certain? And we are going to need to be certain, because to our human eyes it will look like the forces of evil are conquering the Lamb. Professing Christians will apostatize, walk away from the faith. Churches will close. It will seem that Christianity is being swept from the earth. It will **look** like the Lamb has lost. How can we be certain he will conquer?

“For he is Lord of lords, and King of kings...” (v. 14). This isn’t a contest between good and evil as two equal forces. This is the Lord of lords and King of kings perfectly accomplishing all that he chooses and wills. The assurance we can have is rooted in the **identity** of Jesus as he stands in victory at the right hand of God.

And the text wonderfully shows that the great triumph of Christ is not for Christ alone but also for **“those with him.”** And there are 3 remarkable things ascribed to them. They are “called,” they are “chosen,” and they are “faithful.”

The first two words seal the third. *Called* and *chosen* are references to the great, sovereign, eternal acts of God in which he specifically, before the foundations of the world, chose a people for himself to belong to Jesus and to be heirs of everlasting life.

Our ultimate triumph in Christ is rooted in the sovereign, unchanging, omnipotent purposes of God. The calling power and electing purpose of God are the rock beneath our feet. No matter how the Devil rages, no matter how the world reviles and tempts – God’s purpose stands.

- 1 Peter 1:1 – “To those who are elect exiles...”
- Rom. 1:6 – those who are “called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

It is the election and calling of God that is the foundation of our assurance. As Paul writes in **1 Thess. 5:24**, *“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”* Do what? He will *“sanctify you completely”* that *“your whole spirit and soul and body may be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thess. 5:23). In other words, he will hold you fast. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

Imagine there was a football game that mattered a great deal to you. Your favorite team was going to play their archrival – maybe a team that wears scarlet and grey. Maybe it's a team you haven't beaten since 2011. For some reason you aren't able to watch the game live – but you record it. Unfortunately, your best friend texts you with the final score as you are making your way home. But it's good news! Your team finally wins. Not only do they win but they do so with a dramatic, devastating, four-touchdowns-in-the-final-quarter, miraculous, come-from-behind victory.

Now imagine going home to watch the game. The first 3 quarters are awful. The other team seems to score at will and your team can't seem to get out of its own way. The game seems out of reach by half-time and certainly over by the end of the 3rd period. But...you know something. You know the final score. So, every time the other team scores, it hurts, but you know it's only for a little while. You know the final score. Every time you see them celebrating and laughing and high-fiving, so confident of victory, you smile to yourself. You know the final score. And when the announcers close out the 3rd quarter lavishing praises on the scarlet team and all but guaranteeing that they will win, you can't wait for the 4th quarter to begin. You know the final score.

We need to be ready. But we don't need to be afraid.

In Daniel 7, Daniel writes in a text very similar to ours:

Dan. 7:15–18 As for me, Daniel, my spirit within me was anxious, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever."

That's the final score. We shall receive the kingdom. Jesus has promised. And he is the Lord. Amen.