

Beauty on the Beast

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, now we ask again that you would take the seed of your word and plant it in our heart and bear good fruit for the glory of Christ's name.

Give us light and give us love for what you say. We pray all these things in the precious name of Christ. Amen. Please sit down. Well, now as you're turning up to Revelation 17 on page 1037, there's a series of podcasts that begin with the words, this talk has powerful visuals.

You can download them at a certain site. And I feel as we come back to the book of Revelation, every time we have powerful visuals, but never more than chapter 17 and 18.

We come to the city of Babylon. And the language here is very strong. It's sexually degrading language.

I don't know if you picked it up as it was read, but seven times in the original, we have the Greek word that we, is the basis of the word pornography. So in verse one, the great prostitute, Babylon is the great prostitute.

[1 : 22] Verse two, she is the porneus in Greek. And when the kings of the earth, what they do with her is they have porneusen. And her golden goblet is filled with porneus.

And, you know, if you're new in church, you might be wondering why are we given all these details? How does this help us live out the Christian life on Monday? Babylon is a very powerful symbol that comes from the beginning of the Bible in the book of Genesis.

She is both a city and a woman. And the event that took place was the building of the Tower of Babel. That's where we get the name Babylon. It was the first deliberate attempt by humanity to construct a positive civilization, a city and a culture, intentionally excluding and eradicating God. The reason for it is they discovered a new technology which enabled them to build a very big tower. And the idea is they got together and said, now that we can do this, let's build a tower right up into heaven to go into heaven and boot God out and replace him with ourselves.

So Babylon, the Tower of Babel, stands for that attempt to structure our lives so that all that God promises to give us, we can now give ourselves.

[2 : 48] And the whole enterprise had a remarkable unity amongst the people who were there. They imagined a new humanity without someone outside telling them what to do.

A new humanity without a creator to whom they owed anything and without a judge who could tell them what was right and wrong. And so right and wrong were just preferences.

And the motivation we read in the book of Genesis is that we wanted to create a name for ourselves and the name that we wanted to create for ourselves was the name God.

We want to be God. So Babylon is a symbol of every organized human attempt to find ultimate meaning and significance and satisfaction apart from God.

To arrange and structure ourselves and our lives so that God is at best irrelevant. And although it came out of a simple technological discovery, the whole venture was profoundly theological.

[3 : 51] It was directed at God. And I think Revelation 17 and 18 next week are astonishingly relevant and important to us because our modern social institutions and structures are saturated with the theological assumption that God is at best irrelevant.

There is a wonderful book that has been written on this by Craig Gay who is sitting in this room and if you buy the book he will sign it for you sometime later, I'm pretty sure.

It's called *The Way of the Modern World or Why It's Tempting to Live as Though God Doesn't Exist*. And I quote, Craig says, Practical atheism is so deeply embedded in the central institutional realities of our society and culture, in political life, in science and technology, in the economy, in the production and transmission of culture, the danger is not always immediately evident.

I think that's very helpful. And that's why in verse 3, the angel takes John out of the city and into the wilderness because like us, he was so deeply immersed in the city, he couldn't see it. And you and I swim in the warm waters of Vancouver. I say that metaphorically. I say that culturally, not literally.

[5 : 35] But we have shaped our institutions and those institutions are now shaping the way we think and how we discern what is happening. And we can barely see it because we're so deeply immersed in it.

And John is taken to the place which is like the negation of the city, to the wilderness, despite the fact that he has been listening and seeing 16 chapters of visions, he had never imagined the scale and depth of evil in Rome.

So the Babylon project continues, which is why this is so important for us. John is not describing physical prostitution. This woman is not a victim of human trafficking.

She is a trafficker, verse 5. She bears children and deliberately sells them into sex slavery to extend her power and profit. And it's in the wilderness that the angel reveals two things to John.

One is Babylon, the prostitute, the anti-church. And the other is the beast, who is the anti-Christ.

[6 : 42] And he explains the key mechanisms of how they work. So firstly, I want to talk about the anti-church. And this is the first six verses, Babylon. Did you notice that Babylon is the great prostitute, is a distorted parody of the bride of Christ?

She is an imitation of the heavenly city. She tries to collectively offer what belongs to the bride completely apart from the lamb.

It's very interesting. We're drawn to this right in the first verse. After chapter 16, the seven angels with the seven bowls disappear, but they come up twice more.

The first time is in verse 1. One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came to me, verse 1, and said, come, I'll show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters.

Do you know there's only one more angel that comes up from those seven? It's in chapter 21. If you've got your Bible open, just turn across to page 1041.

[7 : 50] Chapter 21, verse 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.

And he carried me away in the spirit to a great high mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. This is where the Bible is heading.

The new creation, we find, is a wedding feast, deeply personal and deeply joyful. And the bride of Christ is a picture in the Bible of us.

Because throughout scriptures, God puts himself forward as our true lover. And the story of the Bible is a story of redemption is of how God brings us back to himself so that he can share his blessings with us.

And the bride, the city, it's a city, it's a place organized around face-to-face fellowship and intimacy with God himself. So if you like, the Bible or human history is the story of two cities, Babylon, Jerusalem, two women, the whore of Babylon, the prostitute and the bride of Christ, two peoples.

[9 : 14] And chapter 17 shows us what a cheap imitation she is. Just look at the contrasts. What is her great weapon in verses 2 to 6? It is sex. She uses sex to manipulate all the kings and dwellers on the earth.

In verse 4, you notice she is drop-dead gorgeous. She is a glamour goddess. She has the most expensive jewellery and clothing. She is the picture of seduction and luxury.

She drips scarlet and pleasure and sensuality. But all of these externals are for one purpose. They are for seduction. Her use of sex is mercenary.

She uses the desires of the dwellers on earth against them until they become intoxicated and drugged and she gains control over them. She offers intimacy but what she gives is enslavement and degradation.

She is the anti-church. And you'll know from the book of Revelation that the bride of Christ stands in fine linen, pure and bright, the purest white which has been given to her by the lamb.

[10 : 28] And the whiteness of her robe reflects her true inward beauty. She is adorned for her husband, kept for her husband and he has given her this spotless robe which is breathtaking.

The prostitute has a golden cup in her hand and in the golden cup she offers the glossy magazine lifestyle. She goes straight for our cravings and she promises the cup can satisfy our thirst.

I mean it's solid gold for heaven's sake. Go on, take it. God will never know. But the cup is full of deadly poison or the way the angel says it, abomination, impurity and pornography. But in verse 7 the woman herself has been drinking from the cup and she is completely inebriated. If you just have a look at verse 7, sorry, verse 6 over the page, she's drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

The word martyr is witness. She has been drinking the blood of witnesses because they are witnesses. She does not want anyone to look to Jesus Christ for satisfaction.

[11 : 47] What really infuriates the prostitute is people who hold on to Jesus Christ. She knows the promises of Jesus even in this book of Revelation.

Listen, let me tell you some of the promises. He says, I will be your shepherd and I will guide you to springs of living water and there I'll wipe away every tear from your eyes. She knows that in the heavenly city the spring of water becomes a river of living water and either side is the tree of life bearing fruit all year round and when you take that fruit it's for the healing of the nations how much we need that fruit.

And she can hear God's promise to the thirsty he says, I will give the water of life without payment. Without payment. She says, take this goblet but if you drink from the goblet it will cost it will cost you everything.

The big surprise is in verse 6. I think the big surprise is John's reaction. He marvels greatly. He can't help but being impressed by the great prostitute.

Even after 16 chapters of visions she still holds a bit of a mystique for him. But the angel breaks the spell and he says, verse 7, I'll tell you the mystery of the woman.

[13 : 10] When she's just a pretender all her allure comes from the beast that she's riding on because the woman and the beast go together. And if Babylon is the anti-church the beast is the anti-Christ. So I'm now going to move to the second point.

In the 9 o'clock service because we had a few people here I went and I stood and I spoke the sermon down from there and I stopped here for a question time between the two points. And you know what? Nobody asked any questions.

Which I was greatly thankful. But you know Dan preached on this passage at the early service so if you had any questions Dan is here.

Alright. Now what do you make of the second two-thirds of this chapter from seven onwards?

There's a lot of detail isn't there? And I think Satan loves to hide behind the work of others and we've met this beast before exercising power sometimes through the state but sometimes through human institutions.

But I think the big thing in this section of the chapter is that the beast is trying to be a fake Jesus. He's trying to counterfeit what Jesus can give us and he does it by deception.

[14 : 24] So just have a look at verse 8 for a moment. The beast that you saw was, it is not and is about to rise from the bottomless pit. I mean that's a copy of the words about Jesus.

In fact three times the angel says this about the beast was, is not, is to come. Just as Babylon is trying to mirror the new Jerusalem the beast is trying to mirror who Jesus is.

What is the beast? Who is the beast? Well you'll be glad to know verse 9 begins this calls for a mind with wisdom. And then we have the explanation.

The seven heads are seven mountains then the seven heads are seven kings and five are fallen and one is and yet one is to come and the beast is the eighth but he belongs to the seventh and then suddenly we have ten kings and we say to each other I think we need some more wisdom. But it's deliberately written like this because the work of the beast and the work of Babylon is not obvious. It's not just through governments and obvious anti-God enterprises that the beast works.

[15 : 39] The beast is at work in every human institution and it requires wisdom because you can't just single out one institution and say that's the beast.

You can't look at you know the hospital system or the legal system or the government and say there's the beast. And I think these verses are written with deliberate complexity to stop us making simplistic identifications and just writing something off writing a great swath of our civilization or culture off.

Lots of commentators try and identify the seven kings with seven emperors of the Roman Empire. Others try and identify them with seven empires.

Do you know honestly you just can't do it. You have to drop a couple of emperors and put a couple more in. You have to squeeze some out. It just doesn't work. The seven mountains are probably a reference to Rome because the first readers needed to know the pressing relevance of this for them in their day.

But Rome doesn't exhaust what's going on here. I think the very complexity of these words is part of the point. It gives us a taste for our need for prayerful thoughtful wisdom.

[16:59] It's always easier to look back and see the work of the beast. You know we look back at Nazism in the 20th century and it seems pretty clear doesn't it? But at the time it wasn't.

At the time it was not straightforward for Christians. Christians fell out about how far they could cooperate and collaborate just with the local government structures of socialism.

I don't think it's so difficult when Christians are under persecution to work out where the beast is working. If you live today in North Korea or Iran or Pakistan or Somalia or Sudan these words would be obviously irrelevant.

But what about us? What about us living here today? Well I think Babylon the project is to construct and maintain a social order apart from God.

The prostitute Babylon rides on the beast and the beast in verse 14 makes war on the lamb and his people. And the beast is not just the state or ideology it's human institutions that develop a habit of thought that rejects God.

[18:11] And I highly recommend Craig's book. It's a great help to us here. Craig argues that the Babylon project has been uniquely successful in the modern Western culture.

That the assumption of atheism is built into all the central institutions of modern society. Modern democratic discourse modern science and technology modern economic life have more effectively removed God than many tyrants or dictators put together.

And these institutions arise from and perpetuate a particular interpretation of reality where God is irrelevant. So we shape our institutions apart from God and then our institutions begin to shape our view of reality so that there's no room or at least no need for God.

And we've placed ourselves at the center of things. We've exchanged the glory of God for the grand sovereignty of my own personal preferences and it's a deception which we're immersed in every day.

You could be born and raised in Vancouver and you could believe this entirely fictional view of reality without God. You could grow up and be completely infatuated this world.

[19:28] Never dare question the power and effectiveness of this world view without God. It's quite brilliant work from the beast don't you think? Let me give you just one illustration.

slightly controversial illustration. It's the current gospel of sexual orientation. Now the term sexual orientation was coined in the 19th century by Sigmund Freud.

Sigmund Freud regarded God as an illusion an infantile projection of the need of a father up into the heavens. Faith is a sort of a neurosis that you have to grow out of.

And so he set about giving a different interpretation of humanity and the world. And he coined the term sexual orientation explicitly to replace the Christian idea of a human soul.

That is the way of removing God from our understanding of our identity is to make our identity about my own sexual desires. So traditionally our identity had come from being made in the image of God and being loved as his children.

[20:44] But now my identity is found in my own sexual desires or at least my interpretation of my sexual desires. You see it creates a humanity without any reference to God.

There's no reference to God in my identity and how I understand myself. it's completely self-referential. And by locking God out we lock ourselves into the dark dungeon of our own ego.

And it's not what the Bible teaches. But this is the gospel that's being taught at almost every level of education in the West. If you're an immigrant and you go to an ESL class in our community you'll be taught this.

Our children at school will be taught this. This is the gospel they will hear. I have a friend who has a child in first grade in a school here in Vancouver and the books chosen to be read out loud to them this year include The Tale of Two Daddies, Heather Has Two Mummies, Jacob's New Dress, My Princess Boy and we could go on.

It's a pity because there are some really good books on the list on bullying and kindness and telling the truth. But I want to say as Christians we support our schools, we're engaged in our schools and

many of you are teachers and many of you are involved in policy and many of you are students and how our schools need Christian thinking and Christian students.

[22 : 18] But just know that all the terms of the conversation about sexual orientation are so deeply believed and taught and so completely atheistic that to believe differently and to speak differently will be regarded as something of a betrayal and you might feel the wrath of Babylon the beast.

I'm not saying this to encourage you to withdraw, that's not the solution, nor to be afraid, but it calls for a mind of wisdom. You know, how are we, not just Christian parents, how are we preparing our children for these challenges, but how do we engage with our institutions?

I mean, how do we live as members of the new Jerusalem while we're in Babylon now? And I think we need to pray for each other and to help each other and to talk about these things.

I think the transgendered issue that's coming down the pipe is a great opportunity for us as Christians to talk openly about these things, to love those who are committed to a completely incoherent view of life, and to stand every now and again against the profoundly false view of reality with all grace, and everything that makes the kingdom of God sound unlikely or unattractive.

And how do we do this? Well, there are two pieces of wisdom in chapter 17. I just want to finish with these two things. And there are two things about the lamb. The first is the lamb conquers.

[23 : 49] I mean, the whole chapter is a chapter of the judgment on Babylon. But in verse 14 we read, they will make war on the lamb, and the lamb will conquer them, for he is lord of lords and king of kings.

Now, it's very important. It means we should not be afraid, we should not be defensive, we should not be overly sensitive, as though everything depends on us.

If the lamb is the one who conquers, it means we can sing the words of the last hymn, with salvation's walls surrounded, thou mayest smile at all thy foes.

And more than that, this chapter tells us that God is at work in those very institutions. Did you notice that in verse 16? The beast and the followers turn on the great prostitute and tear her limb from limb, furiously, they make her desolate and naked and devour her flesh and burn her up.

That doesn't mean evil is just self-destructive, you can just leave it alone, it'll always divide. No, no, no. The reason they turn on each other is precisely because God is involved.

[25 : 04] Verse 17 follows immediately after verse 16. For God has put into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind until the words of God are fulfilled.

What does that mean? It means that God is at work, not just in what we regard as good and clean and glossy things, but God is at work precisely in the place of confusion and deception and pride of those committed to the beast.

He is at work and he is at work through us. So the first piece of wisdom is that the lamb conquers. And the second piece of wisdom is that he conquers with us.

In verse 14, did you notice those with him who are called and chosen and faithful? He doesn't conquer alone.

I think this is one of the most counterintuitive things of the whole of the book of Revelation. We're conquerors. Every one of those seven churches, remember the first two chapters, weak and divided, full of sin, under persecution, Jesus says to those who conquer I will give, to those who conquer I will give, and we wait until chapter 12 to find out how we conquer and we find out we conquer Satan by the blood of the lamb and by the word of our testimony because we love not our lives unto death.

[26 : 32] That is, the way we conquer is we constantly come back to the death of Jesus Christ. We watch how he did it in his death and we do the same thing. We bear witness without worrying about the results on our lives.

Do not be afraid. bear testimony graciously to Christ. I mean, what's the worst thing that could possibly happen? You are called, he says, chosen, faithful.

If you are called, it means you hear the voice of God above every other voice. You hear the voice calling you as a lover. You know that the lamb himself has all the living water and satisfaction alone. and to be faithful means to see this world through the eyes of faith, to try and perceive the temptations of the prostitute or the deceptions of the beast.

It means having the wisdom of trying to not accept the interpretation of the world that is just given to us around us, but know that there's a difference between reality, the reality I experience, and the truth of the word of God.

[27 : 41] And this is what I believe, that this world is a fading world. And chosen means that God has loved you forever from before the foundation of the world, and that he will do anything to fight for you and pursue you.

He will even give up the life of his own son. He's brought you to himself, he's brought us to himself, he is going to sustain us to the end, pure and blameless on the day of the great wedding feast. And I say amen. Let's kneel and pray.