

Beauty on the Beast | Evening Service

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[0 : 00] Right, so we have a few more weeks left in Revelation, just a few more weeks, and you might be wondering, when are we going to talk about the rapture? Because that's like a thing, right? Jeremy, that's a thing, isn't it? That's a thing. That's like an end times thing.

The rapture is the doctrine that at some point before the end of the age, the Christians will be removed from the world. They'll disappear, they'll float up into heaven, and those left on earth will have a very difficult time for a long period of time before Christ returns.

There's this hugely successful series of books and movies called the Left Behind series, if you're unfamiliar with it. That's popularized this idea. So when are we going to talk about the rapture? Well, the short answer is we're not going to talk about the rapture, because Revelation doesn't talk about rapture.

And in fact, I don't think the Bible teaches the doctrine of rapture. It's basically a doctrine that's based on a few misinterpretations of a couple of key verses.

1 Thessalonians 4 and Matthew 24. We'll very quickly look at them. 1 Thessalonians 4 is about people rising up into clouds. But when you actually consider the wider context, the folks in Thessalonica were really concerned about Jesus coming back really soon.

[1 : 21] And they're like, well, we're alive. We'll see Jesus come back. What about all the people that have died? Will they get to be with Jesus in heaven? So the point of the passage is this. There's no benefit in being alive or dead when Christ returns.

Alive or dead, you'll be with Christ. And it uses this picture of being caught up with Christ. That's what that's about. It's not about the rapture. And Matthew 24. This one, I mean, it sounds very rapturous.

I'll actually read you a little snippet of it. It's very interesting. For as in those days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will the coming of the Son of Man.

Then two men will be in a field. One will be taken and one left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and one left. Therefore, stay awake. It sounds like the rapture, doesn't it?

It was the basis for a famous Christian song in the 70s by a Christian artist called Larry Norman. Have I talked about Larry Norman before? Larry Norman had that song. Maybe I've told you this before.

[2 : 28] He sang that really famous song. I'll sing it to you. I'll sing it to you. One verse is like, A man and wife is sleeping bad. She hears a noise and turns her head. He's gone. I wish we'd all been ready.

Two men walking up a hill. One disappears and one left standing still. I wish we'd all been ready. There's no time to change your mind. The sun has come and you've been left behind. So it's like a really, like it's this horrific sort of like, I was, this was, this was big for me.

And, you know, when I was a new Christian, it was a terrifying thought to me. But here's the thing about Matthew 24. Is it about the rapture? No. Given the context of the bit at the start that, and they were unaware until the flood came.

Given the context of the Noah stuff right at the start. In this story, do you actually want to be the person who gets taken away? No, you don't want to be the person that disappears.

The person that disappears is gone to judgment. So Matthew 24 doesn't refer to the rapture event either. In summary, we're not talking about the rapture. I don't believe it's biblical.

[3 : 32] If you believe it, I'm not too worried, to be honest. I don't think it's like a game changer in your faith. Bringing it up, I'm not trying to be controversial bringing it up. And I'm also not denying some central tenant of the Christian faith.

It's actually, it's never been an historic belief in Christianity. It sort of came around the sort of mid-1800s and got a lot of traction in the 1970s through pop culture.

But it is a very attractive doctrine. And here's what's attractive about it. And this is why it's become very popular. Because the attraction is this. The world's falling apart.

Christians don't have to suffer. Because we'll be gone. That's the attraction of it. But, doesn't that go against the big idea of Revelation?

Which is to endure. See, the Bible just doesn't teach. It doesn't teach us that God's going to whip us out of trouble. Revelation's fantastic. It's teaching us how to be in the world, in the hostility of it, in the drama of it, without losing heart.

[4 : 36] And this is the goal of the passage today, in Revelation 17. The reason we have this is it's to help us endure.

It's to help us to be Christians in a world that can be hostile to the Christian faith. And the way it does that, the way it encourages us, is it doesn't say God's going to take you out of the trouble.

It says, no, let me give you God's view of the world to help you cope with it, to help you endure. So let's get into it. Right, a little bit of context to Revelation 17.

So we're nearing the end of these cycles of judgments in Revelation. And let me just say, look, I know this has been really difficult going, these things. But chapter 21 is coming.

And in chapter 21, we hear about how God will make all things new. He's going to create a new heaven and a new earth. But before that happens, before heaven comes to earth, there's this missing piece.

[5 : 35] And the missing piece is this, that evil must be dealt with. Revelation 17, 18 are about this. It's God's view on things.

And God's view is one day I'm going to deal with evil. And I'm going to deal with it comprehensively. So let's get stuck into chapter 17 here. Three main sections. One to six, the unmasking of evil.

Seven to eight, the seeming immortality of evil. Nine to 16, the eventual defeat of evil. I'm going to be focusing on one to six. And it's probably helpful to have your Bibles in front of you there. Right, the first section here, the unmasking of evil.

So before evil is destroyed, it's unmasked. It's shown for what it really is. So we see there in verses one to six, right at the start, you see John again is met by an angel who takes him away, shows him his vision.

And here we meet a woman, a prostitute. And what do we learn about her? Well, we learn she's very sexual. She's attractive. She's holding a cup of something. She's against God.

- [6 : 43] She likes to ruin Christians. She's sitting on top of a beast and on top of waters at the same time somehow. Now, of course, she's not a literal prostitute. She represents something.
- It's a picture to try and tell us something. So what does she represent? And why a prostitute? Don't we have enough images in Revelation to deal with already? So let's have a look at it, okay?
- It says right at the end of the chapter that she is the great city. So what does she represent? She represents the great city, Rome, but not obviously just Rome. All sort of empires afterwards that have kind of been corrupted.
- And you might say, well, I thought the beasts were Rome in previous chapters. And you're right. They were. So how is she different? What does she add to our understanding of Rome?
- And again, just in Revelation, Revelation's not sort of tidy, right? So something will represent something and something else will represent that same thing. It's creating all these layers of meaning to help us. So what does she add to this picture of Rome?
- [7 : 46] Well, first, she helps us understand the nature of Rome's power, of Rome's influence on their people. So in previous chapters, you remember, do you remember Revelation 13?
- We had this baffling image of these two beasts, the land beast and the sea beast. And the power of these beasts was coercive, particularly the sea beast.
- And so their deal was deny Christ or you'll be harmed, you'll be killed. We'll do away with you. Here, the power of the prostitute is not coercive. It's seductive.
- So look at the description of her. She's wearing fine clothes. It mentions colors, right? Purple and scarlet. These are very expensive dyes to make back in the days. She's looking great.
- She's got this jewelry, gold and pearls. And she's holding this cup as if to sort of invite people into her life. So she's a prostitute.
- [8 : 44] But she's clearly a fairly high-class prostitute. So the beast says, deny Christ, I'll harm you. I'll make life difficult for you. The prostitute says, deny Christ because, well, I'll make your life better.
- I'll make you feel good. The prostitute is all about seducing people into compromising their faith. And we see this right in verse 1 here.
- She's good at it. Verse 1, come, I'll show you the judgment of the great prostitute who set it on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.
- Now remember, it's not literally talking about just sex here. The sexual immorality in the Bible is often used as a picture for idolatry. So the Bible likes to talk about the people of God being married to God.
- And so unfaithfulness or sexual immorality is kind of like this picture of giving ourselves to something other than God, like finding our meaning and money or power or sex, for example, instead of God.
- [9 : 50] And so this verse here, it says kings and peasants, just everyone, they gave themselves to this woman. They all did it. They were pulled into worshipping what Rome had to offer.
- And the picture they used is a prostitute seducing somebody. And clearly her seductive powers are formidable. Even John in verse 6 marvels.
- And then he's rebuked by an angel there. Now of John, think about John's situation. Like God has been speaking to him. He's having visions of God, like great things and disturbing things. He can see angels.

Angels are talking to him. He's having visions of God. In that situation, John's like, oh, she's a bit of all right. She's not bad. I quite like the look of her.

If he is impressed by her in that situation, goodness, this woman is, she's really good, isn't she? She's very good at her job. She's powerful. She is so powerful, she changed the political and cultural landscape of the ancient Near East.

[10 : 55] I'll explain what that means. Let me give you like a concrete example of John's day. So Rome was this occupying force.

And these kings in the passage, I think, refer to like these outlying provinces that Rome took over. And a lot of people in these provinces weren't like, oh, this is terrible. I can't believe it.

This is horrible. They're like, no, this is great. Because Rome brought with them all these benefits. Pax Romana, Roman peace, the pleasure industry, high culture.

So perhaps being taken over wasn't so bad. And a lot of them would have been advocating to be closer to Rome. I mean, they vied for Rome's favor because it meant business for them.

And they got a lot of benefits out of being connected to Rome. And all he had to do was to stay in Rome's good favor was, you know, just worship a few emperors. It's not so bad, is it? Small price to pay.

[11 : 55] Very tempting, actually. What Rome had to offer was very seductive. And the idolatry of Rome spread like a virus. That's why the prostitute here is called the mother of prostitutes.

The passage says, though, you know, people were buying into this left, right, and center. They love this. She looks fantastic.

But while she looks pretty and she's very seductive, what she has to offer is something very, very dark. And so Revelation here unmasks, unmasks what's really being offered here.

It unmasks the evil. It's like, we've talked about this before, Revelation sort of allows us to peer behind the curtain, like at a theater, and see what's really going on behind the scenes. So it looks very pretty, but it's very ugly underneath.

Remember, she's holding this cup as if to invite us. And it's tempting, and it looks like a nice drink, perhaps. But the passage says it's a cup of filth. In modern language, it would be like, it's a cup, this beautiful woman offering us a cup of feces and urine and blood, saying, here, how about this?

[13 : 04] Rome could make your life easier. Maybe a bit more fun. Maybe a bit more lucrative. But you had to worship idols to reap the benefits. You had to sell your soul to enjoy them.

So let me summarize where we're at so far. So we have this prostitute character here. And the question I asked was, why a prostitute? Why mention this sort of unsavory sort of picture here? And I think it's because the prostitute is the archetypal seducer.

The point? Don't be seduced by her. Don't be seduced by a culture that tempts you away from God, no matter how attractive that is.

I think a good modern example of this would be abortion. And I think the modern discourse around abortion is a great example. I have friends back in New Zealand who grew up in the church, who are still churchgoers as far as I know, but who actively on social media promote abortion.

Without exception, without nuance. And I've been reading their comments and wondering sort of what happened. Where did they get to this point where they thought that they became these very strong advocates for abortion?

[14 : 11] Revelation says that these are folks who have been seduced by the great prostitute. Seduced by a modern narrative that surrounds the pro-choice movement.

And it's a very compelling narrative, I have to admit. It's very compelling. The protest signs I saw in the march recently are very clever. The slogans are compelling. The abortion rights movement has welded itself very nicely to the human rights movement.

And who wants to deny human rights? I think abortion is one of the great seductions of our age. Folks, the seducer is powerful. And it's very easy to get pulled into something incredibly dark.

Now, I should say a lot more about this topic, but we don't have time. I should talk about the exceptions. I should talk about the infinite grace. How God's grace is so much bigger than an abortion.

But we must keep going. If you want to talk further about that, I'd love to chat. Okay, let me remind you again where we're at because we had a bit of an excuse here. We're in one to six. Evil is imagined as a great prostitute, a great seducer.

[15 : 16] I said, why the prostitute image? Because it's trying to tell us the nature of its power, which is seduction. But secondly, and very, very quickly, the prostitute who works for the beast is the perfect opposite of the bride of Christ, which we're going to learn about over the next few weeks.

See, Revelation loves parodying evil. And here's another great example. We have us before these two women. We have the great prostitute and we have the bride of Christ.

And it's asking us, who will we follow? Again, a million more things to say about one to six, but we must move on. But before we move on, just another quick little aside here.

I've used the word culture a little bit in the sermon so far and quite negatively so far. If this was the only section of the Bible we ever read, we would be very negative people.

We would see no value in culture. We would see no value in government. But it's not the only section we have, thank goodness. The Bible affirms culture. It affirms government. But it recognizes when these things can be damaged and it recognizes when they are corrupted by evil.

[16 : 23] And next week in chapter 18, we hear these laments about how these things have been damaged. But we'll get to that later. Okay, we've got to move on and we're going to move very quickly now.

We've talked about one to six. Moving forward, the prostitute actually fades into the background a bit. The rest of it is more about the beast. And it's very confusing in the middle there, so we won't go near that.

There's 50 theories. I don't think they add much to the overall understanding of the passage. So we'll sort of go to the first bit and the last bit, I think. We'll stop, though, at verses 7 to 8 because that's a fascinating little section there.

Do you see three times it talks about the beast and it says it was and is not and is to come? What's that about? Again, it's another parody. Remember from Revelation 1, I'm the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

See, evil likes to parrot the divine. It grasps at being God but never gets there, really. But it puts on a really good show, an impressive show of power, which is what I think all the mention of kings and horns and heads are supposed to convey.

[17 : 34] It's supposed to convey this sort of sense of, like, this thing is incredibly powerful. Don't mess with it. And our hearts are tempted to fall in behind power, and we must resist that urge.

So the passage tells us that the prostitute is seductive. It tells us that the beast is powerful. But the big point of the second half is that they'll be destroyed.

Verse 14, they will make war on the lamb, and the lamb will conquer them. And how is that going to happen? And this is a shock, I think, verse 16. The beast will hate the prostitute.

They will make her desolate and naked and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. And you're probably thinking, hang on, wait, wait, wait, wait. I thought they were on the same team. Well, yes-ish.

The devil isn't like, you know, the devil who is the dragon in Revelation isn't like the supervillain in the movies whose lair is in this carved-out volcano.

[18 : 35] You know, and he's, you know, he's got like this control room with the screens, and he's pressing buttons, and he's moving his perfectly synchronized sort of troops around the world. And like he's playing a World of Warcraft or something online, like an on-lame sort of online sort of, I said on-lame.

That was a, I don't mean to say that. I love your hobbies. Instead of moving all these kind of troops around the world, and, you know, it's all very organized. No, it's not organized.

It's the beast and the prostitute end up destroying each other because evil is self-destructive. This is not like a happy band of campers here, a happy band of brothers here who are all, like, perfectly organized and all love working together and have team meetings at the beginning of each day, right?

No, they hate each other. I hate God. I hate everything. But God, in his wisdom, gives them just enough cohesion and organization to destroy each other.

So the passage says God organizes this destruction, gives them just enough organization so they end up killing each other. What that looks like, I don't know. But it's his plan. It's God's plan.

[19 : 42] Verse 17 says that. So the big news is the power of evil will one day be thoroughly and comprehensively destroyed. Let me conclude.

The state, culture, civilization, these are gifts from God. But they can be corrupted, and we can be seduced by them in their corrupted state.

We can be seduced by them. We can be intimidated into cowardice by them because they appear so powerful. We can idolize them. We can even think that through our own efforts, we can create heaven on earth.

And that can look like communism at one end. It can look like liberal humanism at the other end. But the state, our efforts, we will never achieve perfect peace and justice and equality. See? We have a crack at it.

We work towards it. We work on behalf of it. But evil is present. There is corruption present. And before God can make all things new, evil must be destroyed.

[20 : 47] And that's what this chapter is about. And this is great news. Imagine a world without evil. Imagine a world without sin. God is going to do what no ideology, no state is capable of doing.

And that's our great future hope that the passage talks about. We live now, though, before that happens. We live before the new heaven and the new earth. We live in the time of promise.

So how do we live now? Verse 9. We be wise. We be wise. It's a call for wisdom and discernment. It's very easy for us to look at evil and corruption in another culture, isn't it?

We can look at the Nazis or ISIS and sort of go, oh, look at them, look at them. But this call is for us to be discerning people in our own cultural moment. So we must ask ourselves, in Vancouver, am I naive about evil in Vancouver?

Am I being seduced by a corrupted culture in some way? Am I marveling at the prostitute drinking the cup of filth when I should be committed to the bride of Christ, drinking from the living waters?

[22 : 00] Am I addicted to the beastly city instead of living in the hope of the new Jerusalem? Folks, we belong to the Lamb. We belong to the Lamb of God.

And I love the description of verse 14 of us. We are called. Three things it says. We are called. We are chosen. We are faithful. Isn't that wonderful? There's a deep theological concepts to unpack just at a very surface level.

We are chosen. That's the doctrine. That's like the doctrine of election. But we are called. That's like the more deeply personal sense in which we experience that doctrine.

It's like, I want you, Aaron. That's what God says. I want you, Aaron. I want you, Jeremy. I want you, Donna. That's as we experience that. We are called.

We are chosen. And we are faithful. Faithfulness is the response to these things here. So let's be people who respond with faithfulness to how the Bible describes us.

[23 : 06] As called and chosen people in our cultural moment. Now, Vancouver does not look like a prostitute. But it is a tempting place. And it is a place that we can very easily accept the categories the city gives us.

It says, you must believe this. You have to go along with this ideology, it says. Revelation is a great gift to us.

Like John, Revelation. Beginning of John, it says John goes out to the wilderness. Like Revelation, we're taken out to the wilderness. You know when you go camping and you sort of think about your life in the city and you sort of reflect on it? That's what's happening here.

In the Bible, the wilderness is the place to think about the city. It takes us out to the wilderness to look back at the city with God's eyes. Where we see the good, but we see the corruption.

And we ask God, Holy Spirit, help us to live faithfully in the midst of this. That's the call of the passage. Amen.