

"The Worldly City"

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Revelation chapter 17? That's page 974 in the Pew Bible. We will look at this whole chapter today, but to begin, I want to start by reading just the first six verses and then the last verse, verse 18, to get our bearings.

So, Revelation chapter 17. Let me pray as we come to God's Word. Father, we ask for your help now to hear and understand your Word. You said at the beginning of this book of Revelation that there is a blessing for those who read and hear it, so we ask that you would grant us this blessing, this blessing of increased wisdom and renewed endurance and a refreshed love for Christ and His kingdom. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

All right, Revelation 17, starting with verses 1 through 6. 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, 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.

And he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery, Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of the earth's abominations.

And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. Now jump down to verse 18. The angel explains to John in verse 18, Okay, so at this point in the book of Revelation, things are speeding towards a climax.

[2 : 2 8] In the coming chapters, John will present to us in overlapping images the victory of God and the Lamb, the final triumph over the forces of Satan, sin, and death, and the renewal of all creation.

And one thread tying these final climactic chapters together is the image of a city. Actually, two cities. On the one hand, there is the worldly city, Babylon, and on the other hand, there's the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. If you have a pew Bible open, let me encourage you to just turn over a page or so to Revelation chapter 21, verse 9. Revelation 21, verse 9.

There you'll see a passage that mirrors the one we just read. It goes like this, Revelation 21, 9 through 11. Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, sounds like a familiar introduction, 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, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper clear as crystal. So, Revelation is telling us then from one angle a tale of two metaphorical cities, the heavenly city and the worldly city. Both have an appearance of beauty. They're attractive. They're both adorned with gold and jewels, but their nature and their outcome are very different. One city is the bride of the Lamb. The other city is the prostitute of the beast. One city is destined for glory. The other is destined for collapse. The New Jerusalem and Babylon.

In the fifth century, the church father, Augustine, once said that nearly all of human history can be thought of in terms of the origin, the progress, and the end of these two symbolic cities, what he called The City of Man and the City of God. And then he wrote about a thousand pages to prove his point in a work he called The City of God. Now, Augustine lived at a time when the unthinkable was happening, the unthinkable at least for his time. Rome was beginning to fracture and break. But Augustine's answer to that cultural crisis was that the city of Rome was never really the eternal city as some touted it. His argument was that there is only one true eternal city, the heavenly city, the city of God. And this city is entered not by birth, but by spiritual rebirth. And this is a city not defined by one nation, but it spans all nations.

And this is a city aligned and organized not according to the standards of human wealth and power, but it's aligned and organized according to God's life-giving incarnate word, the crucified and resurrected Jesus. And this city exists in the midst of the earthly cities, but will one day be all in all.

[5 : 54] Now, in John's day, the collapse of the present-day Babylon, the city of Rome, seemed unthinkable to most of his contemporaries. It seemed that this Babylon was here to stay. So what were Christians to do in the first century? And for that matter, what are we to do in the 21st century? Because Babylon, you see, isn't just a first century reality. Even though Rome was the obvious first century expression of the worldly city, Babylon didn't disappear when Rome fell in the fifth century. In fact, by using the very name Babylon, John is telling us as much. He's speaking symbolically about a principle. In the Old Testament, Babylon was the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and exiled God's people in 586 B.C. But the idea of human society arranged by its own standards of power and wealth, well, that goes back nearly to the beginning of history, all the way back to the Tower of Babel. Let us make a name for ourselves, we humans said. And so they started building a tower that would reach the very heavens, a tower, a city that would signal humanity's liberation from dependence on God so that we might pursue our own ends by our own means.

And it must have been impressive to the ancient people as the tower started to emerge from the plains of Mesopotamia. What couldn't human beings be capable of, they must have thought. And that spirit of Babel, of Babel has run and will run throughout human history, including our own. And John wants to show us here at least three things about this Babylon. And we'll spend our time thinking about these three things in this passage and then how to sort of live in light of that as we get to the end. So the three things we'll see are first, the allure of Babylon. Second, we'll see the power of Babylon. And last, John will show us the demise of Babylon. The allure, the power, and the demise. So first, let's look at the allure of Babylon.

We've seen this already in verses 1 through 6. The woman seated on the many waters, the woman seated on the beast, and the beast is opulent, right? Verse 4, the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup. Babylon clearly represents here the seductive attraction of the world. We'll see next week in chapter 18 that when Babylon falls, one of the great laments that goes up is the loss that that represents of wealth and luxury. Babylon is economically rich. It offers ease, comfort, and pleasure. And that allure comes to all levels of society. In verse 2, it's not just the kings of the earth who have given themselves to Babylon, but it's also the lowly dwellers on earth as well. High and low, rulers and ruled, they're all captive to the economically seductive allure of Babylon. The allure of prosperity and pleasure. And of course, John wants to unmask this seduction for what it is. Behind the glitz and the glam, the prosperity and the pleasure, the reality is, John says, it is spiritual adultery. The golden cup might look nice on the outside, but inside it's full of abominations and sexual immorality. Now, of course, John isn't just talking about breaking the seventh commandment here, though certainly that is part of the seduction that Babylon holds out.

No, throughout the Old Testament, sexual immorality is a poignant metaphor for idolatry. Turning from the covenant love of the one true God, our Creator, and giving ourselves to the gods of our own making. What is idolatry, according to the prophets of the Old Testament? It's spiritual adultery.

But of course, on the surface, we don't always see it that way as we participate in life. Remember, John was writing to seven churches in Asia Minor, and each of those cities where they lived were each in their own way expressions of Babylon. And historically, we know that in order for someone to be fully kind of participating in the economic and social life of the city, that would often involve attendance at idolatrous feasts and at pagan religious celebrations. And often it would hit at a very basic level. In many cities, in order to be a member of a trade guild, in order to do your work and support your family financially, in order to be a member of one of those trade guilds, you may have to sacrifice to the pagan god of that guild, the patron god to whom it belonged. To secure your next contract, you'd have to visit the local temple where the deals were done, but where also immorality and false worship went hand in hand. And in reaction to this pressure, it would seem, as we read Revelation, that some, even inside the church, were arguing that participation in idolatrous feasts, in sexual immorality, well, those are acceptable. In Revelation 2, the letters to the churches at

[12:02] Pergamum and Thyatira, they seem to be talking about this very thing, about Christians compromising under the sway and allure of Babylon. And if we're honest, this is a great temptation for us today.

Like the people of the first century, we don't just go along with dominant culture because we fear persecution, right? In chapter 13, the beast sort of represented that persecuting power that Satan exercises that makes us afraid. But that's not the only reason why we're tempted to go along with the dominant culture. We also go along with the dominant culture because we're attracted to it. We're attracted to the economic benefits, the social comforts, the pleasures we receive.

You see, thinking of the dragon back in chapter 12 and the beast of 13, we might get the impression that Satan's primary mode of offense against the people of God is persecuting power, intimidating fear. And of course, that's very real. But Satan has an equally strong approach in the form of Babylon, the seductive allure of luxury, wealth, and ease. But John wants to unmask this form of Satan's opposition as well. Unmask it. Babylon 2, he says, is responsible for the demise of many faithful witnesses to Jesus, as verse 6 shows us. So, John wants us to be on guard against the allure of Babylon. But second, John wants us to not be fooled about the power of Babylon, the power of Babylon. In other words, where does all this wealth, this prosperity, this seductive luxury come from? What's the power that produces it? Well, John is very clear. It comes from the beast.

The woman in verse 3 is seated on a scarlet beast, and we find in the following verses that this is the same beast that we met in chapter 13. Let's look together at verses 6 through 14. Let's read the next section of our passage. John says, when I saw her, I greatly marveled. But the angel said to me, why do you marvel? I'll tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast with seven heads and the ten horns that carries her. The beast that you saw was and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. 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 because it was and is not and is to come. This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. There are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen. One is. The other has not yet come, and when he does come, he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but belongs to the seventh, and it goes to destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour together with the beast. They are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the lamb, and the lamb will conquer them, for he is the Lord of lords and king of kings. And those with him are called and chosen and faithful.

So the angel explains the vision of verses one through six, and first he focuses in on the beast. Now what are we to make of this beast? Well, if you want more detail about the beast, you can go back and listen to Pastor Matt's sermon on chapter 13. But many commentators have picked up on the reference in verse 9 to seven mountains, right? And many commentators have seen in those seven mountains a clear allusion to the city of Rome. Rome was a city traditionally considered to sit on seven hills.

[16:00] But then John says that these seven hills or seven mountains are also seven kings or seven kingdoms. And so many have tried to align this reference to seven kings with a particular sequence of Roman emperors.

Maybe it sort of recounts the sort of early emperors in the Roman Empire. But what's interesting about the way that John tells the story here, the seventh king quickly gives way to the eighth, who is the beast, and then comes the end.

Now if that's the timeline, we know that Rome, the Roman Empire, didn't fall until hundreds of years after John wrote Revelation. So he couldn't have been naming seven literal Roman empires or kings here.

There must be something else going on. Well, I think rather than seeing kind of a prediction of Roman emperors, I think John is trying to communicate that the church lives in the last phase of God's redemptive history.

Using the number seven symbolically, John is saying that a number of kings have come before. We're still in the midst of that. But the final one, the seventh, is on the way.

[17:16] We're in the sixth of seven chapters, John seems to be saying. We're in this sixth chapter of experiencing the ruthless, beastly power of human kingdoms and human states who try to live life without any real reference to the living God.

Six chapters of the kingdoms of this world living in rebellion to the kingdom of God. And then he says, when the last, when the seventh comes, it will only be for a little while. And in that day, the beast will be fully operative, the eighth that belongs to the seventh.

He'll be the embodiment of all that's come before, this godless, oppressive power. And then he'll draw ten horns of self-centered human power along with him to wage a final war against God.

And John sees that this future final war will be waged between the godless powers of this world and the Lamb. And it will seem like the whole world is swept up after this false messiah, this beast.

And the ten horns represent the totality of godless power and worldly kingdoms. And they will make war on the Lamb and on his people. But John says the Lamb will conquer.

[18 : 32] And we have to ask, why does John give us this glimpse of the final eschatological confrontation between the ruthless powers of this world and the victorious Lamb?

Why give that picture here? How does this help us to not compromise with the worldly city of Babylon? What did the two have to do with each other? Well, John seems to be saying that they have much to do with each other in every way.

Because the woman, Babylon, is riding on the beast. In other words, the engine underneath the opulence, the luxury of this worldly city, the power that sustains and produces the alluring prosperity and pleasure of Babylon, is the beast.

The ruthless power of the godless state, ready to oppress, to dehumanize, to kill, and to make war against the Lamb.

Don't be fooled, John is saying. Where do you think that wealth comes from? Those pleasures that you're tempted by, they are not innocently gained.

[19 : 49] Of course, this was true in the first century. The brutal politics of the Roman Empire produced the conditions of wealth and prosperity in the cities of the empire. And to be seduced by the allure of one was to be buying into the brutality and oppression of the other.

They went hand in hand. If you befriend Babylon, you're in league with the beast. And friends, don't be fooled.

The same dynamics of political economy are alive and well today. But third and last, John doesn't just show us the allure and the power, but the demise of Babylon.

The demise. We see this in verses 15 through 18. Having explained the beast, the angel now turns to explain the rest of the vision of verses 1 through 6. Let's pick up in verse 15.

And the angel said to me, The waters that you saw where the prostitute is seated are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute.

[20 : 54] They will make her desolate and naked and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose of being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast until the words of God are fulfilled.

And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth. So John here, looking again at the end of history, John sees that Babylon will eventually be destroyed.

The pleasures will end. The wealth will be decimated. But the great irony that John sees is that the downfall of Babylon will come at the very hands of the beast and the ten horns.

In other words, evil will turn against itself. The warring rage of humanity against God incited by Satan and his false Messiah will, on the final day, tear down all the wealth and prosperity it has amassed and Babylon will be in ruins.

You see, friends, the tragic reality is evil is always self-defeating. It will collapse upon itself. And I think John wants his readers to see this and to feel this.

[22 : 19] The allure of the world seems so strong. It seems to promise happiness, prosperity, pleasure, but it won't last. Old Testament Babel didn't last.

Old Testament Babylon didn't last. Rome didn't last. And on and on throughout history. If the Lord tarries, the United States might not last. Human kingdoms and the Babylons they produce will all eventually fall on the final day.

So put your hope in something far more lasting. You know, it's a terrible thing, this final picture.

The image here is that the beast has raised up this woman. He has prostituted her to the nations and then destroyed her in the end. What an awful, awful scene.

Friends, how different is the Lord Jesus Christ? He sees his beloved and he doesn't use her as a pawn in a scheme for power.

[23 : 27] No, from heaven Jesus came and sought her to be his holy bride. With his own blood he bought her and for her life he died.

That's the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for his city. And because of this infinite love that he has, he's the only proper object of our desires.

The beast wants us to live in fear. Babylon wants to convince us to live according to our lusts. But Jesus Christ is the only true object of reverence and desire.

The psalmist says, in your right hand, O God, are pleasures forevermore. Come away with me, my beloved, Christ says to his church in the Song of Solomon.

We are offered infinite happiness in the new Jerusalem. As John will show us in just a few short chapters, as we conclude then, what does it look like to live faithfully in our own Babylon moment?

[24 : 41] What does it look like for us today? Well, throughout Revelation, John has been holding up the picture of faithful witness. Faithful witness is the appropriate posture of Christians living through the church age in the midst of all these dynamics.

What does faithful witness look like in our 21st century Babylon? Well, I think there are at least two things it cannot mean. Living faithfully cannot mean at least two things.

First, it cannot mean that we simply run away. You know, it's been a temptation of Christians in every generation when confronted with the world to simply run away, to find a secluded place supposedly away from the fallen world and try to bunker down in safety.

But you know, that never works. On the one hand, as witnesses, I mean, in order to be witnesses, right, we have to be in the midst of the world. How can we be faithful to Jesus to be his witnesses if we avoid all contact with those who presumably need to hear it, right?

But running away and bunkering down in supposed safety never works for another reason. It never works because sooner or later, the Christians who physically flee the world find that they've simply brought Babylon with them.

[25 : 57] Sin remains in all of our hearts. There's no place we can run to where human fallenness will not taint all of our best efforts. So being a faithful witness can't mean simply running away.

But it also can't mean, secondly, it also cannot mean using the world's means to accomplish God's ends. The world works through power, coercion, violence, and spin.

And too often, Christians have tried to use these infernal methods of the beast to try to spread the kingdom of the Lamb. And it doesn't work. Any short-term supposed victory is bound to fail.

The ends never justify the means in the kingdom of God. Remember the Beatitudes of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount? Is that what our neighbors see in us as we participate in public life?

Do they see the same anger and cynicism and dehumanizing realpolitik as the rest of the world?

[27 : 22] So we can't run away. And we can't use the world's means to achieve God's ends. So what does faithful witness look like then? Well, I think the words of Jesus are helpful here.

Jesus once said to His disciples, you are a city on a hill. Yes, you live in Jerusalem or in Rome or in New Haven.

That's the earthly city where you find yourself. Don't run away from it. Rather, in the midst of that earthly city, you be a city. Be a city within that city.

Be the city of God in the midst of the city of man. And the church will become a picture of a new sort of city, a foretaste of the new Jerusalem where generosity and charity and hope are the new way to be human.

Where instead of using one another, we bless one another. Where instead of shouting down at one another, we listen to one another. And as we seek to be this counter-cultural city within the city, Jesus says, will be salt and light to those around us.

[28 : 43] Salt, of course, was a preservative in the ancient world, right? It kept your meat from rotting. In Christians, Jesus says, we'll often need to be like salt. We'll need to enter into the world through our work, through our neighborhoods, through our public life, and we'll need to strive to have a preservative and even sometimes a transformative effect.

How can we love our neighbors as ourselves and make sure that there are conditions so that others are able to do the same? As you're a city, in the midst of the city, you'll be salt, Jesus says.

But then Jesus says, you'll also be light. Sometimes you'll need to shine with something totally new in the darkness. Sometimes Christians will need to build new institutions in the midst of the old.

Sometimes Christians will need to come up with culturally new ways to achieve the common good and the love of our neighbor. After all, you know, after Rome fell to the barbarian migrations in the 4th and 5th and 6th centuries, it was the Christian monasteries, actually, that provided much of the help and healing that not just the church but the world needed.

Education, hospitals, care for the poor. Of course, it'll look different for us today. We don't live in 6th century Europe, right? But the call to be salt and light is the same, the call to be a city on a hill, a city in the midst of Babylon where men and women can flee and find refuge.

[30 : 21] It won't be popular and it won't be easy, but Revelation tells us that it will be lasting and it will be beautiful. That's what faithful witness looks like.

A city within the city where the Lamb is exalted and followed and proclaimed and where those who are worn out from the empty promises of Babylon will come and find shelter and shade and real beauty in the presence of the world's true king.

Let's pray together. Lord, we humbly ask that by Your Spirit You would be the one who satisfies our hearts.

We began this service saying, Lord, whom have we in heaven but You? Oh God, make that truth real to us. Lord Jesus, would we see Your cruciform love for us and be captivated in love once again by Your forgiving, merciful grace.

And Lord, as we are broken free from the allure of the world around us, would You then give us the courage and the creativity to be the new Jerusalem in the midst of these old ruins of Babylon?

[31 : 59] Lord, rise up in our midst, not a tower of Babel that doesn't need You. Lord, but be like a well. Lord, help us to dig wells that are full of the water of Your grace so that our neighbors can come and drink from Your goodness and be satisfied.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.