

## REV 17:1-18—BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS

**INTRO:** There's an old song by Jim Reeves that says, **"This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through."** Do we really believe that? Those of us who are Christians may pay lip-service to that, but here in the US most of us like our homes, our lives, as they are.

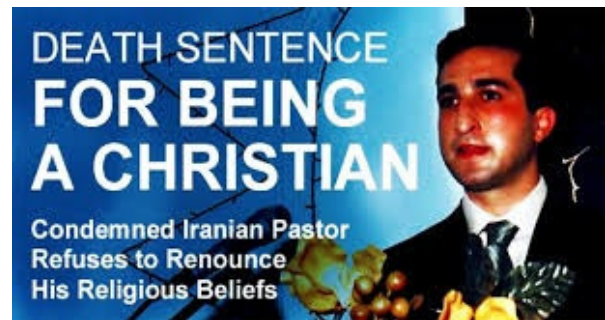
There's another song, a country song recorded by Kenny Chesney, that's probably a little more accurate. It goes, **"Everybody want to go to heaven, but nobody want to go now."** And then there's a blues song by Albert King that's most accurate of all. It says, **"Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die."** Despite the ups and downs of life, most people—including myself—like life here and now. We might tweak things around the edges, but basically this world *is* our home. Am I right or am I just talking to myself?

Here's the problem: If we take the Bible seriously, then our attitude toward this world and our lives here suggests that we—our lives, our values, our priorities—have been co-opted by a deadly force or spirit, and we don't even realize it. What do I mean? In much of the world—for example, in every single country that is controlled by Islam—to be a Christian means to face life as a second class citizen at best; or to face discrimination, persecution, or death. The same was true throughout the first 300 years of church history in the Roman Empire and has been true in many places around the world during much of the last 2000 years.

To be a Christian in such places means "counting the cost," as Jesus said we should do. Yet in all such times and places people have converted and come to Christ—including in Islamic lands today. Why do they do this? The answer is because in Christ they know they have the pearl of great price. They have that which is worth more than all the riches, beauty, and goodness this world has to offer, *and* they have that which more than compensates for all the discrimination, persecution, and pain they may face on account of being Christians.



Here in the US—and especially here in the Valley—we do *not* have to face such choices. I am *not* saying that persecution is a good thing. People who say we should pray for a little persecution don't know what they are talking about. But I am saying that the lack of stark choices, the absence in any meaningful way of having to "count the cost," has dulled our perception or even blinded us to *God's* view of the nature of the time and place in which we are living. As a result, although we are "nice" people and we live "decent" lives, there is little that distinguishes us from all the "nice," "decent," "good" atheists and pagans who surround us.



The book of Revelation—perhaps better than any other book in the Bible—addresses this very issue in a graphic and compelling way. Some years ago a two-line poem was written entitled **"The eyes of my consciousness."** It goes like this: **"The eyes of my consciousness have been gouged. . . . Who will put them back in place?"** If we understand the message of Revelation, it can help put the eyes of our consciousness back in place.

What I want to do this week and next is look at the central message of Revelation 17 and 18. These chapters speak about **"Babylon the great, the mother of harlots."** In this part of Revelation, the apostle John gives us *God's* assessment of the society in which we live. If we understand this clearly then, by the HS, we can reorient our values and priorities so that we can live proactive, meaningful lives *as Christians*, instead of drifting down the stream carried along by the values and priorities that our culture is so happy to give us.

[**READ Rev 17:1-18**] What is this telling us? It's central message is telling us:

**PROP:** The society we live in opposes God and Jesus Christ—but God is still in charge.

**O/S:** We will see this as we consider what "Babylon the great the mother of harlots" is; but then, flowing from this, we will also consider the response that God calls us to make.



**BACKGROUND:** To understand our passage today we need to understand the nature of the book of Revelation. John is writing very much in the tradition of the OT prophets. The *primary purpose* of biblical prophecy was not to predict the future but to try to get the people to change their behavior. The prophets did this through what are called oracles of judgment and oracles of salvation. IOW, “if you do not change your ways, judgment will come; but if you remain faithful and follow the Lord, blessings will come.” That idea is present throughout Revelation. In Revelation, John discerns the situation of the churches, he sees how God’s ultimate purpose relates to that situation, and he calls for a response by the people.

That brings us to **Revelation 17**.

### **I. What is “Babylon the great, the Mother of Harlots”?**

“Babylon the great” is NOT the restored city of Babylon in Iraq as some people speculated when Saddam Hussein was in power. The “Mother of harlots” is NOT the Roman Catholic Church as Dave Hunt wrote in his book *A Woman Rides the Beast*.

**A. Instead, throughout the book of Revelation John uses symbolic, not literal, language to describe the contrast and conflict between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of Christ—between the world and the church.** In chs. 17-22 he describes this contrast and conflict using the symbolic imagery of 2 cities that he portrays as 2 women: Babylon the great vs. the new Jerusalem—the great city vs. the beloved city—the mother of harlots vs. the bride of Christ. Babylon the great is not some specific city on the earth but is a symbolic way of epitomizing the system and worldview of *everything and everyone—every culture and society—that is not Christ’s*.

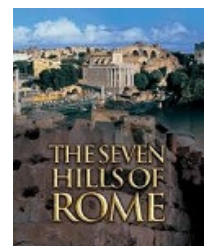


**B. We see this in at least two ways:**

(1) John constantly speaks in “universal” terms when describing Babylon the great and the harlot. **Rev 17:5** includes in the name of Babylon “**the abominations of the earth.**” **Rev 17:15** says that “**the waters where the harlot sits are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.**” When he says that, he is using language that contrasts Babylon with the worldwide church which Revelation elsewhere says is drawn “**from every tribe and tongue and people and nation**” [**Rev 5:9; 7:9**] **Rev 17:18** says that “**the woman is the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth.**” Elsewhere in Revelation John uses similar language. Three times in **Rev 14** and **18** John says that Babylon corrupts and deceives “**all the nations.**” **Rev 18:24** says that Babylon is guilty of the blood of “**all who have been slain on the earth.**” **Rev 19:2** says that the great harlot was corrupting “**the earth.**” So Babylon the harlot is a *worldwide* entity or phenomenon that affects all people and nations.

(2) John does what the other prophets frequently did: he takes specific events, including OT prophecies, generalizes them, and gives them new application and new meaning.

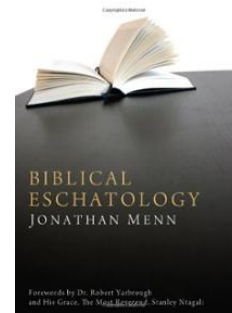
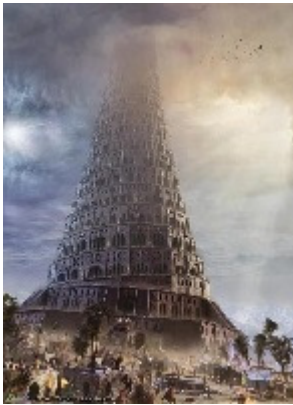
(A) For example, in 17:9 he talks about the “seven mountains on which the woman sits.” This has caused many commentators to conclude that John was talking about the city of Rome, because Rome is the “city of the 7 hills.” John undoubtedly *did* draw on Roman power, economy, and culture as the historical backdrop for his depiction of Babylon the great—but he universalized it. For example, Rome’s 7 hills are actually of very minor elevation—ranging only from about 40’ to 450’ above sea level. But John uses the word “mountains,” not hills. Likewise, he calls Babylon “the great,” not just “Babylon.” These are verbal clues that he is speaking of something far greater than just Rome.



(B) Similarly, the two major biblical sources for John’s depiction of Babylon the great are Jeremiah’s oracle against historical Babylon in **Jeremiah 50–51**, and Ezekiel’s oracle against Tyre in **Ezekiel 26–28**. In his description of Babylon the great, what John has done is to combine all of the evils of Babylon, Tyre, and Rome. The evil of these cities was two-fold: first, cultural and economic exploitation and corruption; and second, religious corruption. These two are related: Jesus frequently warns believers about the fact that the lure of riches and the world can turn our head, choke the word in our life, and thereby become our new, true Lord. IOW, money/prosperity/things easily lead to *spiritual* infidelity. That is why Babylon the great is called the “**mother of harlots.**” Calling Babylon the great “the mother of harlots” is figurative language to indicate “**that which allures, tempts, seduces, and draws people away from God.**”

In short, Babylon the great is not an individual city, or even an individual empire, but is a world-wide entity/a system/a culture and mindset. As one commentator puts it: “**John’s Babylon is the final climax of the**

**enterprise begun at Babel in Genesis 11** (and, BTW, in Hebrew the words for Babylon and Babel are the same): **[It is] the agelong human enterprise of organizing human society in opposition to God.**” [Bauckham, *Bible in Politics*, 93] I have more on this in my book, *Biblical Eschatology*, if you are interested.



**C. How does this relate to us in America today?** We need to remember what John is doing. John is challenging Christians to critique our own societies. As British theologian Richard Bauckham says, “**Any society whom Babylon’s cap fits must wear it. Any society which absolutizes its own economic prosperity at the expense of others comes under Babylon’s condemnation.**” [Bauckham, *Theology*, 156]

In his book *How Then Shall We Live?*, which discusses contemporary society, Francis Schaeffer said:

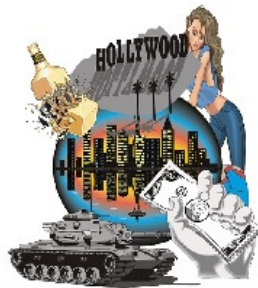
**“As the more Christian-dominated consensus weakened, the majority of people adopted two impoverished values: *personal peace and affluence.*”** These are not bad things in and of themselves. But such values are centered in the well-being of the self for this earthly life alone. Consequently, they force us to ask the question: Are they *Christ’s* values? Any values or priorities, although good in themselves, if turned into ultimate values or priorities, become forms of *idolatry*.



In this regard, another commentator pointed out: “**If we want to identify the greatest enemy of the Christian faith, we must look closely at Babylon and observe its obsession with consumerism. There is nothing that stands more effectively as a barrier to people knowing God than the desire for wealth that comes through capitalism.**” [Alexander, *From Eden*, 183] That is a description of 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

## **II. So what response does God call us to make to all of this? (READ Rev 18:4-5)**

John’s exhortation to “**come out of her, my people**” is not calling for withdrawal from society but for a distinctly countercultural way of life in the midst of society. Since Babylon the great transcends first-century Rome, John’s exhortation applies at all times and places. African scholar Onesimus Ngundu puts it this way: “**John, like the OT prophets, is exhorting God’s people to shun the charms and snares of the prostitute city. Babylon exists wherever there is idolatry, prostitution, self-glorification, self-sufficiency, pride and complacency, reliance on luxury and wealth, and violence against life.** (And you think this doesn’t apply to modern America?) Ngundu continues: **Believers are to separate themselves from all forms of Babylon. While they still have to live and work in the world, they also need to claim a distinctive identity and to develop habits of resistance that will enable witness to take place.**”



**A. Why must we do this?** Because this world—including the US—opposes God and Jesus Christ. This whole chapter tells us money (“**gold, precious stones, and pearls**”) and power (“**kings and kingdoms**”), are linked with spiritual forces (“**blasphemous names**” and the “**beast**”) and evil values and practices (“**abominations, unclean things, and immoralities**”) that oppose God and Christ. **Rev 17:6, 14** tell us that there is actual opposition of the world to followers of Jesus Christ, just as Jesus said would happen.

However, v. 16 tells us that Babylon carries within herself the seeds of her own destruction. v. 17 adds

that Jesus is the One who is really running the show; He is using Babylon the harlot to fulfill His own purposes. And **v. 14** tells us that the Lamb—Jesus—is **“Lord of Lords and king of kings.”** IOW, He is sovereign and is the ultimate victor. God knows what is going on; He is orchestrating events; and He is challenging us to choose.

**B. What are some practical ways to live distinctly as Christians in the world?** The first thing is, we do NOT start wearing sackcloth, being morbid, no longer laugh, withdraw from the world, stop rooting for the Packers, or doing the other things we like to do. Christians are called to be fully *engaged* with this world, although our values and priorities are not to be determined *by* this world. Christians are to be a redemptive force and presence in the world. After all, it is Christians who led the fight to eradicate slavery, who have been leaders in founding hospitals and schools, and who—historically at least—were leaders in government, the sciences, and the arts.

One Christian thinker puts it like this: **“Who could believe in a God who will make everything new ‘later’ if it is in no way apparent from the activity of those who hope in [Him] that he is already beginning to make everything new *now*.”** [Schillebeeckx, *God the Future*, 183–84]

First and foremost, therefore, we must resist the temptation to live only good, decent, *private* lives but not be actively engaged in the world of politics, the arts, and actively working to alleviate human suffering and structural evils. We are called to be “salt and light” in society. We need to take that seriously and not hide under a basket.

Here are two practical suggestions:

(1) Right here in this fellowship we have an inspiration: Matthew Strenn. He ran for and was elected to the Outagamie County Board of Supervisors. Praise God for Matthew! As I tell my friends in East Africa, the only reason why Tanzania has a Muslim president when 2/3 of Tanzanians call themselves Christians, is because Christians put him there. Muslims know the value of getting involved in government, but Christians do not.



In our country, the only reason Obama is president is because Christians put him there. If you voted for him, that’s fine—you’re involved. But a significant majority of Evangelicals opposed Obama. In 2010 they turned out to vote in great numbers and the Republicans took over the House of Representatives. But in 2012 the Republicans nominated Mitt Romney, a Mormon. Lots of Evangelicals said “I could not vote for a Mormon”—even though he has their political and cultural values—so they stayed home instead of voting. To not vote *is* to vote—it is to vote for the person you can’t stand.

So be involved in doing what you can to influence the course of our community and our nation. Be active in the community and in community organizations. Write letters to the editor, support your party, run for office, and vote. Don’t hide your Christianity.

(2) Money talks. What are we doing with our money? How much have we budgeted for *giving* to missions, for building the kingdom, and helping the poor and needy? Do we even have a budget? Do we know how much or what percentage of our income or assets we *actually* are giving to missions, for building the kingdom, and helping the needy? If we cannot answer these questions, then we need to seriously re-evaluate our lives.

My guess is that most people in this room—not everyone, but most I think—are able to give more than 10% to missions, for building the kingdom, and helping the poor and needy. Are we? Jesus is Lord of all—and that includes being Lord of our money. Our actions—including what we do with our money—speak louder than our words.

One man who clearly understood this was John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in England in the 1700s. Wesley started out very poor, but through royalties and book sales and whatever, he actually became one of the richest men in England. What did he do with his money? The website [givinggrace.org](http://givinggrace.org) tells us:

**“Wesley records in his diary that one year his income was 30 pounds and his living expenses 28 pounds, so he had 2 pounds to give away. The next year his income doubled, but he still managed to live on 28 pounds, so he had 32 pounds to give to the poor. Even when his income rose into the thousands of pounds sterling, he lived simply, and he quickly gave away his surplus money. One year his income was a little over 1400 pounds. He lived on 30 pounds and gave away nearly 1400 pounds. . . Wesley believed that with increasing income, what should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of *giving*.”**



The Bible does not give us a bright line that says: “You must give this much” or “you must live on only so much or have assets totaling only so much.” No. We are all in different circumstances. When Zaccheus in **Luke 19** became born again, he understood the implication of the gospel with respect to his money—so he gave 50% of all he had to the poor. Wesley was able to give up to 98% when his income reached 1400 pounds. What you give to missions, for building the kingdom, and helping the poor and needy is between you and God—but the issue is an important *spiritual* one. Putting our money where our mouth is demonstrates, perhaps better than anything else, where our heart, mind, soul, and priorities really are. It demonstrates whether we are citizens of the KOG or are really citizens of Babylon the great.

**CONCL:** Because our lives are basically pretty good and fairly easy here, we tend not to see that the values of this world—including the US—oppose God and Jesus Christ. We tend to live decent private lives. But the result is that most people in our post-Christian society don’t see that Christianity has anything positive to offer at all.

But God is sovereign. He knows what is going on. He calls us to be redeemers—that is what salt and light are. We have all been blessed. Let us use what God has blessed us with to strengthen the foundations, and do what we can to give people light, life, and hope. As Joshua said over 3000 years ago, so let us resolve in our hearts, minds, and families, **“choose you this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” [Josh 25:15].**

