

Sermon 49: Revelation 17:1-6: The Great Prostitute

OUTLINE

Her influence
Her appearance

INTRODUCTION

The book of Revelation can be understood through the lens of counterfeiting. We have noted in the past how there is the Trinity and there is the anti-trinity of the dragon and two beasts. Well there is another aspect to this, just as Christ has a bride, so the beast who is a mockery of Christ has a bride. But where Christ dies for His bride to save her we see that the beast will rise and kill his bride. The parallels are striking:

Both peoples are portrayed as women.

Both are portrayed as cities, the prostitute as Babylon and the church as the New Jerusalem.

Both sit on many waters.

Both are killed by the beast but the church dies to rise again, 11:7, 11.

Where the prostitute rides the beast, the Bride is trampled under the feet of the beast 11:2.

The prostitute serves the beast but the Bride serves Christ.

The prostitute seeks to seduce the world and lead it into sin, the Bride seeks to preach to the world and lead them into holiness.

The prostitute is promiscuous and unfaithful, the Bride is faithful.

The prostitute is immoral and impure, the Bride is holy.

The prostitute is full of wealth and pomp the Bride is humble and poor.

The prostitute is dressed in scarlet as a prostitute, the Bride in white wedding garments.

The prostitute holds a golden cup that appears to offer good things but is full of poison; the Bride holds a communion cup with the promise of new life.

The prostitute is the mother of all prostitutes, the bride the mother of the faithful.

The prostitute is the source of all of earth's abominations; the church is a light to the world.

The prostitute is drunk and the Bride is sober.

The prostitute is a people united under the devil's influence doing his will of sin, the Bride is a people united under Christ and doing His will.

The prostitute manufactures the spirit of the age which is always in agreement with sin and against God; the Bride incarnates the culture of the age to come and is always in agreement with God and against sin.

The prostitute will drink the cup of God's fury; Christ has already drunk this for the Bride and now we will drink at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Our portion is the Lord's detailing of Babylon's judgement. V1, '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.' This is a judgement that has been hinted at in 14:8, 'Another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.'" And, 16:19, 'The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath.' This is the great enemy of God's people, the human arm of the devil's actions against the church and God wants the church to know in detail how she will be judged for her sins. Babylon is the symbol for the collective anti-God, anti-Church actions by mankind since the Garden of Eden. Just as we can divide the human race up into believers and unbelievers, or the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the unrighteous, so we can

collectively divide them up into their citizenship of Babylon or the New Jerusalem. Everyone belongs to one of these two cities. The next two chapters detail this fall of Babylon.

Today we will look at the first 6 verses and note her influence and appearance.

Her influence

Firstly, we see that she is 'seated on many waters,' v1. The notion of seated which is repeated when we see her on the beast is a picture of ruling and reigning, a picture of ease and being at peace.

We do not have to guess at what the waters may be we are clearly told in v15, And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.' We are being told of her worldwide influence.

We see that sinful humanity who has followed satan are portrayed not as covenantally faithful but covenant breakers, as a prostitute. We were made to be in a relationship with God relating to Him in love and obedience and He would be our God and pour out all His goodness upon us. The notion of a prostitute shows a life in disregard for this covenantal relating to God and portrays our hearts as promiscuous instead of faithful.

Notice as well in verse 2 how this godless culture goes on to affect the world, '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.' The nations who should have been faithful to God have been seduced by the prostitute and are now addicts to her wares. They are entrapped alcoholics who now rely on her to continue to satisfy them.

The notion of sexual immorality is a double entendre. Sexual immorality is a common metaphor for idolatry and unfaithfulness in worshipping God. Israel and Nineveh are portrayed in this way for once having known God and then abandoning Him. Here we see the world that has been visited by Christ, and Christ has been appointed as King over us at His resurrection, to fail to follow Him is idolatry and unfaithfulness. He has paid the purchase price for the bride but we withhold ourselves.

Sexual immorality does not only serve as a metaphor for unfaithfulness but prostitution, sexual immorality and idolatry have long been a tag team to seduce people from God. The majority of the history of prostitution tells the story of prostitutes being associated with idolatry. Baal worship was a form of fertility worship and included sexual rites. Baal worship was spread by Jezebel in Israel and so is used as a symbol of Babylon's infection of the church in 2:20, 'But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.' We know from Paul's letter to Corinth that the eating of food offered to idols and sexual immorality were linked and a real problem in the town of Corinth where 1000 prostitutes of Athena seduced the men of the town. Balaam is another figure in the history of Israel who misled Israel. God would not curse Israel through Balaam for Balak so Balaam taught Balak to force God's own hand against His people by getting women to seduce the men into idolatry and bring down God's curse on them.

This form of seduction is alive and well. How many have abandoned Christianity for the permissiveness of homosexuality, pornography, marriage to an unbeliever, sex before marriage, or a life of perpetual pleasure. In the western world alcohol, drugs, sex and an attitude of anything goes has had a better following than any other religion. This religion of the West goes into conservative places like Russia, India and China and the young people

follow the pied piper and are led to their deaths. Drunkenness with its fearlessness of consequences and its false courage and its false sense of security and bravado well describe the effect of this age's seduction on the masses. Heedless of judgement millions are revelling their way to hell.

Her appearance

In verse 3 we see John is transported to the Wilderness, this is the place where demons dwell and the church is preserved. And we see the prostitute sitting on the back of the beast. The beast we know is the governmental and persecuting power waging war against the church, we see here an alliance of power and seduction to undo the saints and destroy humanity. The scarlet beast is the colour of the dragon, 12:3. This colour could represent blood, royalty or Rome.

The prostitute's clothing is commented upon, v4, 'The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls.' These are her baubles with which she seduces the nations. We will see in chapter 18 that Babylon is also an economic power and these pieces speak of her rich economic powers. The opulence of the lifestyle, the security that money brings, all of this would have worked in the first century to put pressure on many nations to cosy up to Rome and its religion in order to gain these economic benefits. The picture is striking because ordinarily having dealings with a prostitute impoverishes man, here we are given the opposite impression; dealings with this prostitute will make you rich.

Dangerously in her hand is a cup, 'holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.' The outside of the cup looks appealing and rich but inside the cup is sin, a poison that kills. The dwellers on the earth have become drunk with her wine and are marched off to slaughter. Today we face the same appealing options. Humanism with its concern for humanity sounds like a good thing, but with a man centred view, sin is redefined not as something contrary to God's will or nature but anything contrary to man's will. Homosexuality, abortion, gambling, pornography, divorcing your wife, and many other things are now legal because of the gold veneer of humanism. It sounds good in theory but it is a candy coating on a deadly poison.

In v5 we are told her name, 'And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.'" The idea of mystery is usually something hidden now being revealed. God is here revealing the true nature of the culture of the first century. The spirit of the age is the anti-Church Babylon, it is the city whose builder and founder is Satan, it is just another expression of the harlot who has seduced humanity in every age and given birth to every vile thing. Every God-hating philosophy, false religion, sin-enshrining law, mind-distracting sin, culturally entrenched error, these and many others are her grotesque offspring. She is riding Rome's back.

V6, 'And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.' Not only is sin against God mixed in her cup but her sins against the people of God. All the blood spilt in the war of Gen. 3:15 between the seed of the serpent and the woman is shed and drunk by her. She is addicted to killing saints, she cannot survive without hating those who follow Christ, it is an irresistible compulsion to exterminate the church and she is influencing the beast. 1 Pet. 4:12-19, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. 14 If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15 But let none of you suffer as a murderer or

a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. 16 Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 And "If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.'

We must take note of how the Christian is described, as a saint, that is one who is holy who is set apart from her ways. And the 'martyrs of Jesus.' The word martyr is literally witnesses. The blood of the saints is spilled because they witnessed to the Lordship of Christ because they refused to bow the knee to Caesar and suffered for the truth that Christ alone is God and can save.

But necessary for us all to see is John's response, 'When I saw her, I marveled greatly.' Her beauty, her allure, her wealth, her influence, her position it can all be very intimidating. We follow a Saviour who died, who lived 2000 years ago, who is politically incorrect, who did not invent any technological breakthrough, who does not have sex appeal or won an Oscar. Christianity can seem dull and glum by comparison. We must not be deceived we must see her true nature and purpose, we must resist her wares and charms and we must be faithful when she seeks to seduce or crush us. The spirit of the age rides the back of the beast in alliance with satan to destroy us don't let down your guard and don't be taken in by her the face paint. She is a killer and poison. Don't desire her and don't desire to be like her. Be the pure bride of Christ, the virgin and separate bride of Christ, be the faithful bride who patiently waits, watching and praying.