

Lesson 27: Chapter 17

Revelation 16 ended with the 7th bowl being poured out and a great voice from the temple declaring, “*It is done!*” This is language that signals finality and judgment. The effects of that 7th bowl included a devastating earthquake, cosmic upheaval, and the fall of Babylon the Great (**Revelation 16:19**). But that fall was *announced* more than it was *described*.

Now, in **Revelation 17**, the story’s pace slows down. One of the bowl angels steps forward to give John a deeper look behind the curtain. The judgment of Babylon is no longer *proclaimed*; it is *explained*, *unveiled*, and *interpreted* through vivid symbolism.

We meet Babylon not as a city in ruins, but as a woman: rich, powerful, and alluring. She is described as a prostitute, seated on many waters, clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, and holding a golden cup. The imagery is provocative, meant to expose not just political corruption but spiritual seduction. She is not the only figure in the vision: she rides a scarlet beast, covered in blasphemous names, with 7 heads and 10 horns. The two work together... but only for a time.

We are in dense symbolic territory, drawing from **Daniel**, **Ezekiel**, **Jeremiah**, and the Roman empire. We’ll be asked to consider kings, kingdoms, counterfeit religion, demonic parodies, and the self-destruction of evil. More than that, we’ll be asked to examine our hearts. Babylon is not just “out there.” Her influence is real; her seduction subtle. **Revelation 17** is the Spirit’s warning to the Church: see her clearly, do not be deceived, and do not be drawn in. She may wear the garments of a queen, but she is not a bride. Her pleasures fleeting; her influence temporary; her destiny destruction.

Let’s dive in.

[1] 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, [2] 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.” [3] 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. [4] 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. [5] And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” [6] And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. [7] But the angel said to me, “Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. [8] 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. [9] This calls for a

mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; [10] they 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. [11] As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. [12] 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. [13] These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. [14] They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

[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. [16] And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, [17] for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. [18] And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”



(Revelation 17, ESV)

“Beauty” and the Beast: Introduced (vv. 1-6a)

The vision begins with an invitation: *“Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters...”* (**Revelation 17:1**)

This angel, one of the 7 who poured out the bowls of wrath, now takes John into the wilderness to reveal the reality behind the fall of Babylon announced in **Revelation 16**. We are introduced not to a smoking ruin, but to a figure of breathtaking splendor and terrible corruption. Her “judgment” (**Revelation 17:1**) is the purpose of the vision, but it begins with the unveiling of her appearance, her character, and her influence.

Who Is This Woman?

She is called “the great prostitute” (**Revelation 17:1**) and “Babylon the Great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations” (**Revelation 17:5**). In the symbolism of Revelation, and the prophetic tradition more broadly, prostitution often signifies spiritual unfaithfulness and idolatry. She is not *only* guilty of sexual immorality, but of leading the nations astray from God. **Jeremiah 51:13** helps illuminate this: *“O you who dwell by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come, the thread of your life is cut.”* Old Testament Babylon, like the woman here, sat by “many waters” and trusted in her wealth, but was brought low by divine judgment.

In **Revelation 17**, the prostitute is clothed in purple and scarlet, the garments of royalty and wealth. She is adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls, and holds a golden cup, which is “full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality” (**Revelation 17:4**). Like the false bride she is, she appears beautiful and powerful. She intoxicates the nations with her allure (**Revelation 17:2**), drawing kings and peoples into her corrupt orbit. But the beauty is a disguise. Her cup is full of filth. Her riches mask idolatry. Her intimacy is a lie. She is not a wife; she is a seductress, pulling hearts away from the Lamb with the promise of worldly pleasure and prestige.

The Waters and Her Reign

We are told she sits on many waters (**Revelation 17:1**), later interpreted in **Revelation 17:15** as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages”, a 4-fold symbol for the unbelieving world. This matches the pattern of symbolic geography throughout Revelation (cf. **Revelation 13:1**), where the sea and the waters represent the masses of unredeemed humanity. The woman is enthroned among the peoples of the earth, exercising influence over the world system. Her pride is made plain in **Revelation 18:7**: *“She said in her heart, ‘I sit as a queen, I am no widow, and mourning I shall never see.’”* This is her heart: secure in her power, boastful in her wealth, and confident in her corruption. She thinks herself enthroned forever. But this false confidence is part of her downfall.

The Beast She Rides

She is not alone. She rides a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, with 7 heads and 10 horns (**Revelation 17:3**). This clearly links the beast to the one we saw in **Revelation 13**, the first beast who rises from the sea. This beast represents political power, particularly in its satanic, persecuting, beastly form. He is the instrument of the dragon (Satan), and he is opposed to the saints.

This woman, Babylon the Great, is not the beast but partners with him, riding his power to maintain her rule over the nations. They are distinct, but united: she is the seductress, he the tyrant; she deceives, he devours.

The Blood of the Saints

Revelation 17:6 adds a final horror: *“And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.”*

This glittering prostitute is not merely a cultural force; she is a killer. The world’s seductions, when embraced, become the world’s persecutions. What begins with flattery ends in murder. The woman offers intimacy but demands allegiance, and those who remain loyal to the Lamb are slain.

“Beauty” and the Beast: Explained (vv. 6b-14)

After John sees the woman, he is stunned: *“When I saw her, I marveled greatly”* ([Revelation 17:6b](#)).

This response is striking. John is not immediately repulsed. He marvels. The Greek verb (θαυμάζω / thaumazō) often implies a kind of awed wonder or amazement. And that’s the point: Babylon doesn’t always look evil. She appears beautiful. Seductive. Impressive. Even John is caught off guard.

But the angel rebukes this amazement and calls John (and us) to discernment: *“Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery...”* ([Revelation 17:7](#)) The word mystery here (μυστήριον / mystērion) doesn’t mean something unknowable. It refers to something that requires spiritual revelation to understand. This is a moment of divine interpretation. The veil is being lifted.

The Beast’s Parody of God (v. 8)

The angel begins with the beast:

“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction.”

This is a blasphemous parody of the divine title used for God in [Revelation 1:4](#) and [Revelation 4:8](#): *“Who is, and who was, and who is to come.”*

Whereas God *is*, the beast *is not*; he is currently restrained or diminished. Whereas God *is coming*, the beast *is about to rise* ... only to be destroyed. This is evil’s counterfeit resurrection, not from heaven, but from the abyss.

This symbol matches the picture of Satan’s binding during this age ([Revelation 20:2–3](#)). The beast (and by extension, the satanically inspired powers of persecution) *is not*. His influence is real but restrained. He will rise again briefly ([Revelation 20:7–9](#)), but only for destruction.

[Revelation 17:8](#) continues: *“And the dwellers on earth... will marvel to see the beast...”* This mirrors John’s own marveling, but here it is idolatrous wonder, not innocent surprise. Those who do not belong to Christ are awestruck by the beast. They admire its power, align with its authority, and marvel at its false glory. But the saints are different, whose *“names were ... written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.”* (emphasis mine) This is a clear reference to sovereign election. The saints are not deceived because they have been sealed and secured by the Lamb.

A Call for Wisdom (vv. 9–11)

“This calls for a mind with wisdom...”

This echoes similar language in [Revelation 13:18](#) (regarding the number of the beast). It signals symbolic depth. We are not meant to decode a literal cipher but to understand the theological picture.

“The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings...”

Many interpreters latch onto the phrase *“seven mountains”* as referring to Rome, the city famously built on 7 hills. That allusion is valid. Rome is clearly in view. But the symbolism goes beyond that.

These 7 heads are also called *“seven kings”* ([Revelation 17:10](#)), that is, a succession of earthly rulers or empires. They represent the completeness of beastly power throughout history, not 7 literal kings or emperors.

“Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come...”

This pattern speaks of historical progression, of empire after empire rising and falling in rebellion against God. Some see echoes of [Daniel 2](#) and [Daniel 7](#) here: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, etc. But the point isn’t to line them up precisely. It’s to see the recurring beastly nature of world power apart from Christ.

“As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.”

The 8th king ([Revelation 17:11](#)) is perhaps a final, intensified form of the same beastly power, still of the same lineage, but now climactic and terminal. He is not truly new, but is the culmination of all that came before: beastly opposition to Christ, concentrated into one final rebellion. This “eighth” is significant, not just numerically, but symbolically.

In early Christian theology, the 8th day became a profound symbol of new creation. Christ rose on the 1st day of the week, which was also seen as the 8th day, a day beyond the cycle of the old creation week (7 days), marking the beginning of something eternal and qualitatively new. Church Fathers like Barnabas, Justin Martyr, and Augustine picked up this theme: the 8th day is the day of resurrection, renewal, and life in Christ, a symbol of the inaugurated eschaton.

So when John speaks of the beast as an “eighth” who belongs to the 7, it is a deliberate parody. The Beast’s “eighthness” is not resurrection, but resurgence into rebellion. It’s a satanic counterfeit of the true “eighth day.” Christ rises to reign forever; the Beast rises only to be destroyed. One inaugurates a new creation; the other brings a final gasp of the old, doomed order.

The Lamb’s 8th day leads to glory; the Beast’s “eighthness” ends in judgment.

The Ten Horns and the Beast’s Brief Dominion (vv. 12–14)

The 10 horns are 10 kings who have not yet received royal power, but who will receive it for one hour, a symbol of brief, fleeting reign. Likely not literal kings (remember that 10 is a symbol of fullness/completeness), but symbolic of earthly authorities who ally themselves with the beast, especially in a final concerted opposition to Christ and His people.

“They are of one mind and hand over their power and authority to the beast.”

This is Satan’s final push. Earthly powers (religious, cultural, economic, political) are all marshaled in opposition to the Lamb. But they will fail.

“They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with Him are called and chosen and faithful.”

Victory does not depend on our strength, but on His sovereignty. Yet those who follow Him are marked by three words that define the Church’s identity:

- **Called**: summoned by God’s voice
- **Chosen**: elect from before the foundation of the world
- **Faithful**: persevering in loyalty to the Lamb (and kept by the Lamb, according to [Jude 1](#))

“Beauty” and the Beast: Devoured (vv. 15–18)

The final verses of [Revelation 17](#) deliver a twist, one that would have shocked any first-time reader. The woman, Babylon the Great, who seemed so secure in her power and dominion, is betrayed by the very forces she rides.

The Waters: Her Global Reach (v. 15)

The angel reiterates the identity of the waters on which the prostitute is seated: *“The waters... are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.”* This emphasizes her global influence. She is enthroned among the nations, spiritually ruling and seducing. This matches the pattern from [Revelation 13](#): the beast rises from the sea ([Revelation 13:1](#)), and the dragon gives him authority over the earth-dwellers ([Revelation 13:7–8](#)). Babylon rides this influence. She is the cultural, economic, and religious face of the beast’s dominion. The world calls this civilization, but God sees it as spiritual prostitution. Unlike the beast and the horns, the peoples never turn on her. They remain enthralled to the end. Her judgment comes not from a moral revolt (again, Revelation leaves no room for Post-Millennial optimism), but from God, who ordains that the very powers she once rode will destroy her. Evil devours itself, but only when (and because) God decrees it.

The Beast Turns on the Prostitute (v. 16)

“The ten horns... and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.”

This is one of the most jarring reversals in the book. The woman, who rode the beast in **Revelation 17:3**, is now devoured by him. Her former allies become her destroyers. The imagery here is violent and final:

- **Desolate and naked:** stripped of glory and shamefully exposed
- **Devoured:** consumed by the very beast she once guided
- **Burned:** a symbol of total judgment, especially for the unfaithful (cf. **Leviticus 21:9**)

This is poetic justice. Babylon used the beast to gain power; now the beast consumes her. The kingdom of darkness always eats itself in the end.

God Is Behind It All (v. 17)

“For God has put it into their hearts to carry out His purpose...”

This is not Satan’s strategy; it is God’s sovereign decree. The Beast does not destroy Babylon because evil outwitted evil. He does it because God ordained it. As with Pharaoh or Judas, God uses even rebellious hearts to accomplish His perfect plan. This is the hidden engine behind history: God uses the self-destructive tendencies of evil to bring about His righteous judgment. The prostitute’s destruction is not an accident. It is divine justice, executed through the very system she empowered.

The Woman Is a City (v. 18)

“And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

This clarifies the symbol: the woman = a city. But not merely one literal city. This is Babylon the Great, the spiritual archetype of all worldly power that exalts itself against God. Ancient Babylon, Tyre, Nineveh, and Rome were all historical examples. But Babylon continues to appear wherever wealth, power, and luxury are divorced from covenant faithfulness and used to seduce the world.

She is not limited to a time or place. She is every age’s siren call to spiritual compromise.

Conclusion: “Beauty” Unmasked

This woman is not just a symbol of ancient Rome, though the Roman Empire is surely in view. Nor is she simply the Roman Catholic Church, as some argue. She is Babylon, in her final form, the seductive, powerful, idolatrous world system that has manifested in every age. She is not gone. She still rides the beast. She still draws hearts away from Christ with wealth, beauty, pleasure, and power.

Babylon’s appeal is not crude. She does not always tempt with obvious evil. She offers things that are, in themselves, good: success, sex, art, influence, abundance. These are God’s gifts, not Satan’s inventions. But when they are pursued without reference to God, without submission to the Lamb, they become spiritual adultery. Babylon teaches us to grasp for gifts while rejecting the Giver.

And so the danger is real. Do not be arrogant enough to think you are immune. Babylon does not announce herself with fangs, but with fragrance. Her seduction is subtle. Her touch is soft. She flatters, not threatens. But what begins in comfort ends in judgment.

This vision is not just about what will happen to the world. It is a warning to the Church. **Revelation 17** calls us to discernment. We are not called to asceticism, to flee from culture, beauty, or material blessing, but to obedient delight. The Church is not anti-art, anti-culture, or anti-wealth. But she must not give herself to them as lovers. The Bride belongs to Christ. We are called to receive God’s good gifts with thankfulness, but to hold them loosely, and to never trade the gift for the Giver.

Babylon is seductive. The beast is terrifying. Together, they deceive the world. But the Church must not marvel. We must understand. The beast will rise, but he will be destroyed. Babylon will reign, but she will fall. See her clearly. Don’t be deceived. Don’t be drawn in. Stay faithful to the Lamb.