

Series: The Sovereign Slaying of Sinful Systems (a study in Revelation 17-18)
Sermon Text: 17:8-18 Babylon's Autopsy (See App for lesson, slides, and to ask questions)

Last time, we learned that within the Revelation of Jesus is a *"tale of 2 cities"* (chart in prior notes) depicted by 2 women (Babylon, the Great Prostitute and New Jerusalem, the Lamb's Bride). While Babylon and Jerusalem were real cities, personifying them as *women* implies that life in cities (anywhere) is always a relationship with a system. Revelation, therefore, asks: "Which woman (system) deserves allegiance and has more sway over us?" Defining lady **Babylon** is tricky but not impossible if you know her biblical history: First, there were the tower builders in Genesis 11 at a place called Babel. The book of Daniel later catalogs the captivity of God's people in ancient Babylon. In New Testament times, the author of 1 Peter 5 wrote from Rome but called it **Babylon**. But it wasn't until **Revelation 17-18** that the biblical mystery of **Babylon** was fully revealed. So, "What can be deduced about Babylon?"

- It's bigger than one nation, ruler, or moment in history.
- It's inspired by spiritual evil (cf. Genesis 3; Ephesians 2:2; 6:10-20).
- It's a transhistorical symbol for humanity organized apart from God.
- It's a system/culture of idolatry, exploitation, violence, arrogance, and seduction.

The opening 7 verses of chapter 17 portray **Babylon** in her prime, an alluring system (*the prostitute*) that misuses its lovers (*kings, commoners*) in a futile effort to promote sin and destroy righteousness. **John marveled** at this *angelic* glimpse of human progress built on the bodies of believers. They weren't merely being oppressed for their faith but slaughtered for it. Like a vampire, Babylon was drunk on their blood! Of course, this was nothing new. It happened to God's Old Testament people under regimes like Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria. The Roman Empire was just the version that God's New Testament people were facing under **John's** leadership. Such scenarios may feel ancient and far-fetched to us, but **Babylon** continues to shape shift herself into every culture. Be it physical raids in African tribal areas or pressures to compromise in corporate offices, Jesus followers still face the monsters

John saw in *Revelation 17*--a culture of misplaced loves and disordered affections trying to force followers of the Lamb (Jesus) to pledge allegiance to them. The angel's message, however, was that hope is not lost! After seeing the sheet of *Babylon's* bed pulled back in *verses 1-7*, John got to see the sheet of her autopsy table pulled back in *verses 8-18*. Like an expert medical examiner, the *angel* reported how her outward glamour had been masking an underlying terminal decay. And that's how we arrive at today's faith-inspiring...

BIG IDEA: Babylon is diseased and dying from the inside out!

This text describes how Satanically inspired human systems function, struggle, and always collapse. We'll see how *Babylon*: 1) *May appear ultimate or godlike*; 2) *Never outlasts the King of Kings*; and 3) *Always self-destructs*. First though, let's quickly get to know the cast in *chapters 17-18*:

Character	Sector represented	Primary Motivation
Babylon	Humanity organized Against God	Pride & Self-Glory
Kings	Politics/Government	Power & Control
Merchants	Commerce/Industry	Profit & Luxury
Sailors	Logistics/Tech/Trade	Connectivity & Wealth
"My People"	The Faithful	Integrity & Obedience

Follow along as I read *verses 8-11* which depict how *Babylon may appear ultimate or godlike*: *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; 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. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes*

to destruction. This is the **7 headed beast** of *chapter 13* that crawled from the sea the way Rome invaded Asia Minor. It was a Frankenstein of blasphemous Daniel 7 images that warred against the Lamb's bride under direction of the Dragon (Satan). Many have tried to identify these **kings**, but more likely, they're a caricature of world leaders who've been animated like political puppets on **Babylon's** arm to draw **earth dwellers** into her bewitching bed and make her seem ultimate and godlike. One question for us is: "What makes their claims so believable and desirable, and how can wisdom help us refute and resist their allure?" Satan constantly attempts to mimic God, who according to **1:8** is "*the Alpha and the Omega...who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*" (cf. 1:4, 4:8). Our notes explain how some have lined this **beast** to various historical figures, but The Book of Revelation is not for speculation. It's more of an x-ray machine that exposes the innerworkings of humans who organize to push God out as Satan's puppet kingdoms. Satan wants us to view them as God-like and permanent, yet every regime comes from the same **pit** and is trapped in a loop that's headed for (*goes to*) **destruction.**

Another thing we can agree on is that **Babylon never outlasts the King of Kings.** The **angel** reiterated this hope in *verses 12-14: 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 (a short period), together with the beast. These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. This implies Babylon is less about 1 empire and more like successive systems animated by Satan.* Like a historical relay race of tyranny, each evil regime hands the baton to the next which expects to receive more honor and luck than their predecessors. *Verse 14,* however, reveals the destiny of the Devil's prideful puppet kingdoms: ***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.*** Ironically, this system which sustains herself by taking the **blood** of others is being dismantled by the slain **Lamb** who willingly donated His **blood** so enemies could become family!

Let's glance at *verses 15-16* which remind exasperated believers that **Babylon** **always self-destructs:** ***The angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the***

prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. This is the key that unlocks **Babylon's** mystery: Her power is entirely generated by the people who prop her up--her power structure is a massive shell game which depends on the compliance of the crowd! She represents Satan working through people, and while her systems have gotten more sophisticated over centuries, here's the reality: Satan's reign of terror would have never taken off if Adam and Eve hadn't taken the bait! He promised to make them like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; but **verse 16** reveals they were tricked into helping him build a self-cannibalizing, counter community: ***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.*** After ***pillaging*** her, the ***horns*** (**Babylon's** political parts) will barbecue and ***devour her flesh!*** Said different, evildoers may appear to be a loyal and loving family, but theirs is a false friendship built on what Dr. Paul David Tripp calls a "***contractual love***" which lasts so long as you meet my needs, agree with my perspective, and make my life easier. Stop doing that, and I'll terminate the contract, roast you, and seek a more compliant supplier. Alternatively, Tripp has referred to true love as "***cross-shaped***", in that, it reflects the Lamb's self-sacrificing choice to pursue the good of others, regardless of whether they deserve it or can benefit us in return. I wonder, "***Which love most often characterizes your life?***" Summarizing **verse 16**, Jewish commentator David Stern (Re 17:16) wrote: "***Those who are good love even those who, unlike themselves, are evil. But those who are evil hate not only the good but also even those who are like themselves, evil.***"

So, **Revelation 17** reveals how **Babylon** (Satanically inspired human evil): 1) ***May appear ultimate or godlike***; 2) ***Never outlasts the King of Kings***; and 3) ***Always self-destructs***. In Revelation, evil is not so monstrous at first glance--she's seductive, beautiful, wealthy, impressive, and seemingly invincible. Yet, **Babylon** is a counterfeit kingdom! She can seem ultimate, never ending, and harmonious, but listen to **verses 17-18**: ***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. And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.*** This affirms the mindboggling truth that a

Sovereign Creator is somehow greater and ultimately in control. I wonder, “Do you find that to be comforting or disturbing, and why?” Professor J Scott Duvall (224) offered this consolation: “*Persevering amidst materialism, injustice, political corruption, false religion, and so on becomes easier when we realize that Babylon-like systems never last. In the end, they will oppose the Lamb and suffer his wrath, a fact announced ahead of time by God. Our faithfulness flourishes when we take the long view and see the ultimate outcome. We need perspective to side with the winner. We need the eyes of faith to see that God’s plans are permanent. Most of us will confront this issue when deciding how to use our time, money, and possessions. Jesus’s words not to store up treasures on earth but to store up treasures in heaven echo in the background (Matt. 6:19–24).*”

Hopefully, you’re seeing there’s more to Revelation than “*discerning literary perspectives.*” It offers readers **wisdom** to identify the spirit of **Babylon** in our world so we can resist it and participate in God’s renewal project. To that end, we’re closing each **Revelation 17-18** lesson with eye-opening questions to help us discern ways Christians are unwittingly captivated by Babylon’s allure. God wants us to consider the systems that wound us versus the Savior who heals us. So, contemplate these questions:

1. “How does an autopsy of your past reveal wounds from broken human systems? Did those come from participating in the cruelty, being crushed by it, or both?”
2. “How would you describe the toll those seasons took on you physically, emotionally, spiritually, or otherwise?”
3. “During that suffering, how did the Lamb meet you in your pain, perform a restorative work, and call you to partner in bringing similar healing to others?”

Our sin nature makes Babylon seem attractive, but this autopsy reveals that it’s deadly to climb into bed with her. Next time, we’ll attend Babylon’s funeral where people testify to the skeletal reality behind her surface-level glamour. As you ponder

all this with God’s people, remember, next steps need not be taken alone--Christ’s church can become your supportive family!

Sunday to Monday Connection: Revelation 17 exposes the truth about Babylon, which is basically humanity organized apart from God. What appears powerful, successful, and attractive is ultimately empty and temporary. But this passage reminds us that only Jesus, the King of kings, will endure forever. As followers of Jesus, we are called to live with courage and faithfulness, even when compromise feels easier.

- **Question:** What influence in daily life most competes for your devotion and obedience to Christ?
- **Next Step:** This week, prayerfully identify one area where you feel pressure to compromise your faith, and discuss what's going on with some trusted people.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. At the end of the day, global conflict boils down to this: Satan hates God and creation is caught in the crossfire which makes politics a spiritual matter. How does knowing this help us engage differently and bring fresh perspective to texts like Ephesians 6:10-18?
2. Ask yourself: “What does an inventory of those I love and hate reveal about my faith?”
3. God designed us to use the things of this world to creatively and generously benefit others, while Satan often tricks us into treating people as resources, tools, or commodities to help us acquire whatever we crave in this world. Use this diagnostic question as a lens for relational conflicts: “When angry at a spouse, child, or coworker, am I acting out of love for them, or am I just mad that they broke the contract and refused to give me what I wanted? Moreover, what would true love look like in my specific situation?”

X-Ray Features	Equivalent in Spiritual Wisdom
Penetrating	Passing through the "Purple and Scarlet" to see the heart.
Exposing	Making hidden, internal structures visible.
Diagnostic	Identifying the exact fracture (disease) within a system.

X-Ray Features	Equivalent in Spiritual Wisdom
Non-Destructive	Seeing the beast's true nature without being consumed with it.

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Summary of 17:8-18:** “The angel now interprets the vision for John, explaining how the beast, the kings, and the prostitute fit into God’s plan and how the Lamb will triumph over all his enemies. This section is set within the judgment of Babylon the Great (17:1–19:5) and offers the angelic interpretation of the immediately preceding vision of 17:1–6. Most commentators note the numerous parallels between Revelation 13 and 17, illustrating again the cyclical presentation of truth in the book. The angel begins with a description of the beast ridden by the woman, along with his influence among unbelievers (17:7–8), before moving to explain the beast’s seven heads (17:9–11) and ten horns (17:12–14), as well as the destruction of the prostitute (17:15–18). Through it all, we hear again about Jesus’s lordship and triumph, the challenge for his followers, and the sovereign plan of God to destroy evil.” (Duvall, 226)
- **Daniel images from our lesson in 13:1-10:** These are images from the Old Testament book of Daniel chapter 7 where 4 monsters emerged from *the sea*. Daniel said, “*These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth*” then described a 4th *beast* that would surface as a massive, brutal world empire from which *horns* (i.e., evil kings) seem to keep coming and coming (*Ever felt this way about world politics?*). The thing about John’s 1 *beast* is that it’s a composite of Daniel’s 4 *beasts* which turns this into a timeless description of wicked empires...Regardless, it was like the Roman Empire just wouldn’t die! John also said: *They worshiped the dragon (Satan), for he had given his authority to the beast (Rome), and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Emperors claimed titles such as “*lord, god, son of god, savior, etc.*” while demanding worship and devotion from their subjects. John unmask this *blasphemy* (divine disrespect) as *dragon (devil)* worship because *Satan* is always the enemy behind the enemy. This invites contemporary questions like: “Where is blasphemy occurring today, what’s the line between honoring world leaders and disrespecting God, and when is it wise to use coded language like John did instead of speaking plainly?”*
- **Book of Life:** “The inhabitants of the earth will be mesmerized by the beast’s counterfeit resurrection (cf. 13:3). The names of these unbelievers (see the comments on 13:7–13) were never written in the book of life, a heavenly register symbolizing the security of believers (3:5; 21:27). Whereas the Lamb was slain from the creation of the world in 13:8, here the names were kept out

of the book from eternity past, pointing to God's foreknowledge. Mounce wisely reminds us that John is not teaching a form of determinism (according to 3:5 names may be blotted out of the book of life) but emphasizing the great distinction that exists between the followers of the Lamb and those who give their allegiance to the beast." (Duvall, 227)

- **Babylon unmasked:** "For those who were sorely tempted to make their peace with Rome, Revelation unveiled truth about empire. It revealed empire as both a seductive whore who offered the good life in exchange for obedience and a ravenous beast that devoured any who would dare oppose it." (Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, xxii)
- **An organized system:** "Babylon is the prevailing economic-religious system in alliance with the state and its related authorities, as it exists in various forms throughout the ages." (Beale 354)
- **Evil's downfall:** "Power centers must extend themselves in order to accomplish their purposes. As illustrated by Rome's dependence on client rulers, power tends to flow outward. But this extension of power is expected to return to the center in the form of loyalty and allegiance; that's how the center retains its power. Although such centers appear invincible, according to the wise and sovereign purposes of God, their own selfishness will be their downfall...People need to take inventory of how invested they are in any ungodly power structures and renew their cries for divine justice." (Duvall, 229-230)
- **God's supremacy:** "God put it in their hearts to do what will fulfill his purpose. In the Tanakh God often uses the wicked to accomplish his purposes; see Exodus 10:1, Habakkuk 1:5-11. This verse is a strong statement of God's sovereignty, like Ro 9:6-29&NN. Though much is said in the book of Revelation about Satan and his power, there is no dualism, not the slightest suggestion that Satan is on a par with God." (Stern, Re 17:17)
- **Jesus wins:** "Satan will ruin this harlot, he will leave her destroyed for that is what the beast does, even to those who swear their allegiance to it. There are a few things we know for sure, but John presents at least two clear points. First, the Lamb will triumph. Though the beast wages war and the battle looks lopsided, there will be no contest for the Lamb is the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. 'He wins,' John says, period. Second point...the harlot will be ruined by the beast. Empire will always lead to the same end. Evil cannot sustain itself. It does not belong in God's created order. The great city, that is Rome, that rules over the earth, though it looks to be unstoppable, is part of a system that cannot last." [Read more from Marty Solomon](#)
- **Hopeful perspective:** Some scholars suggest that the wisest way to interpret Revelation is by focusing on what can be known and how we're to respond. But that's difficult when we see no logical path to victory. With that in mind, [this article](#) is a breath of fresh air! It hypothesizes how AI could end up being a political gamechanger as soon as 2030 by leveling the playing field so races become more about information than money! While interesting, the article is just one example of this takeaway: To build strong faith muscles we must cut

off the blood supply of bad news and be infused by hidden treasures of good news. Dan Heath, author of *Made to Stick*, said: “The seeds of improvement are more readily available than we often realize, if we are focused on what’s working rather than what’s broken.”

Various speculations:

- **Rome as Babylon:** “If Babylon means Rome or the Roman Empire (see 14:8), the fallen could be the first five emperors, of whom Nero was the last. After three emperors who ruled for a very short time each came Vespasian, who would be the sixth, ruling from 69 to 79 C.E., and living now. Titus would be yet to come. In his commentary on Revelation R. H. Charles considers Nero to be the ‘beast’ of this chapter, expected to return from the dead leading the kings of the east against Rome (see 13:17b–18).” (Stern, Re 17:10)
- **7 heads and hills:** “The beast’s seven heads are identified as seven hills, perhaps a reference to the seven hills of ancient Rome. Yet the Greek term *oros* is translated ‘mountain’ the other seven times it appears in Revelation (6:14, 15, 16; 8:8; 14:1; 16:20; 21:10) and connotes strength and authority. This connection is made explicit in 17:10 when the seven heads/mountains are also interpreted as seven kings or rulers. Now for the apocalyptic riddle: 5 (fallen) + 1 (is now) + 1 (has not yet come but will only remain for a little while) + 1 (the beast = the 8th king). Many look to first-century Roman emperors to solve the riddle, but interpretive problems remain (e.g., whether to begin counting with Julius Caesar or Augustus and whether to count Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, who each reigned only a short time). A better option is to consider the symbolic significance of the numbers in the passage. Seven represents the fullness or completeness of the beast’s power (cf. 12:3; 13:1–2). The final manifestation of these wicked kingdoms, personified in an individual wicked leader, is described as an ‘eighth king’ (17:11). Since 888 is the number of Jesus, and since Jesus was resurrected on the eighth day (counting the full week from the previous Sunday), the beast is a counterfeit christ or messiah, boasting of a counterfeit resurrection (13:3, 12, 14; 17:8). In the end, however, the beast remains a messianic pretender and, like all the other false messiahs, is doomed to destruction.” (Duvall, 227–228)
- **10 horns:** “Historically, the background of the ten horns is Rome’s practice of using client kings to rule its provinces (e.g., Herod the Great and his sons). Figuratively, the ten kings are identical to the “kings” mentioned elsewhere (16:12, 14; 17:2, 18; 18:3, 9; 19:19) and represent the totality of pagan political powers allied with the beast in the epic eschatological battle. Their reign will be short-lived (i.e., ‘one hour’), but even then they have a shared purpose: to submit their power and authority to the beast in an all-out war against the Lamb.” (Duvall, 228)
- **The trouble with speculating:** “One of the biggest mistakes we can make in reading Revelation is spending too much time speculating on the precise predictive identity of the wild thing (or the antichrist; see appendix 3), the mask of the dragon. Who will it be? Luther and Calvin thought it was the pope, as have many zealot Protestants since (and some still today). When I

was in college, I (Scot) read a book that proclaimed with certainty it was Mikhail Gorbachev, and his birthmark excited much speculation. Others thought it was Henry Kissinger, and then it was Saddam Hussein. These speculators were all wrong, and they've all been wrong because they lack the kind of imagination a faithful reading of Revelation requires, wanting to reduce everything to literal predictions. But as we have seen, we should not look for one, single end-time wild thing. Instead, dissident disciples should discern the dragon behind the wild things of every age, including our own day. We are not looking for figures by predicting specific persons in the future; rather, we are looking for images of dragon-like leaders at work in all societies and all times. They are puppets, whose strings are pulled by the dragon. Remember, these images are not about predicting the future but about shaping our perceptions of the present.” (McKnight, 65)

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- [5 Strategies for Reading Revelation](#) from the Bible Project (the first 17 minutes is GOLD!)
- [Heaven and Earth Theme](#) from the Bible Project
- [Other super helpful Revelation summaries](#) from the Bible Project
- [How Revelation mimics ancient Olympic games](#) by Marty Solomon

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