Revelation 17:1–18

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

> *And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: and upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.*

Two Women, Two Cities — The Design of the Book

The structure of the book of Revelation brings two women before us in deliberate parallel and contrast. One is shown in chapter 17 — the great harlot, Babylon. The other is shown in chapter 21 — the bride, the Lamb's wife. Both are also described as cities. The last verse of chapter 17 — *the woman which thou sawest is that great city* — confirms that the harlot and the city are the same. And in chapter 21:9, the same form of words is used: *I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife* — followed by the vision of the holy city, New Jerusalem. The two women are the two cities. Chapter 17 shows the one in her harlotries and

idolatries. Chapter 18 shows her in her worldliness. Both are aspects of the same system.

The same angel is the guide in both visions. In chapter 17, one of the seven angels with the seven bowls says *come hither, I will shew thee the judgment of the great whore.* In chapter 21:9, one of the same seven angels says *come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.* The parallel is deliberate. The Spirit of God intends for the two to be compared, so that the difference between them might be seen in all its sharpness.

Carried Away in Spirit into the Wilderness

When John is shown the harlot, he is carried away in spirit — Darby uses a lowercase s — into the wilderness. When he is shown the bride, he is carried away in the Spirit (capital S, with the article) to a great and high mountain. The distinction is spiritually significant. It is the Holy Spirit who takes one up to show the bride of Christ. The wilderness is the place where nothing of God is present to sustain — the place of spiritual desolation, where a system that claims divine authority has actually no divine support at all. That is where the harlot is seen.

The children of Israel in the wilderness were sustained by God at every step — bread from heaven, water from the rock, cloud by day, fire by night. But the wilderness in itself, apart from God's provision, is a place of nothing. This woman is seen there — not in the place of God's blessing but in the place of spiritual emptiness, making her pretensions in a desert.

Babylon — Religious and Political — Two Aspects, One System

Babylon in Scripture has two aspects: the religious and the political. Chapter 17 is the religious aspect — the harlot, the false church riding the beast in the first

half of the week. Chapter 18 is the political aspect of Babylon — the great city in her worldliness and commerce, judged when the bowls are poured out. The agency of destruction in chapter 17 is human — the beast and the ten kings hate the woman and destroy her. The agency in chapter 18 is divine — God judges the city directly. Those who insist there is only one Babylon in Revelation miss this distinction, and are forced into geographical theories about a literal rebuilt city of Babylon that have no real scriptural basis.

The name on the woman's forehead is MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT. Babylon at its origin — the tower of Babel — was the first great organised religious rebellion of man against God. The name means confusion. And the whole system that flows from Babel, through the Babylonian empire, through the succession of world powers, to its final manifestation here, carries that character: confusion of what belongs to God with the pride and rebellion of man.

The Woman Riding the Beast — The Anti-Church

The woman sits upon the scarlet beast — she is the rider. She is in control, directing the beast's motions, at least for a time. This is the position of the anti-church — the apostate Christianity of the first half of the week, which has political power over the western empire. She is clothed in purple and scarlet, decked with gold and precious stones and pearls — all things that in Scripture are connected with true divine glories. Purple speaks of imperial power; scarlet of earthly glory. The Lord Jesus was mockingly clothed in these very colours at His trial. They belong to Him by right. This woman pretends to them and prostitutes them.

She holds a golden cup — full of abominations and filthiness. The contrast with the cup on the Lord's table could not be starker: *the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?* That cup is in the hands of the Lord's people now. When the rapture takes place, it will be gone from the

earth. And this golden cup, full of what it is full of, will have the upper hand — until the beast and the ten kings tire of it and destroy it.

The Scarlet Beast — Seven Heads, Seven Kings

The beast of chapter 17 is the same revived Roman Empire of chapter 13, described here from a different angle. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits — plainly Rome, the city on seven hills. But the heads also represent seven kings: five are fallen, one is, one has not yet come. The beast that was and is not is the eighth — and is of the seven. He is both the seventh head wounded to death and revived, and something new: an eighth, numbered by the resurrection number, energised directly by Satan in a way no previous world ruler has been.

The ten horns are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom but receive power one hour with the beast. They are present during the first half of the week — because it is they and the beast who destroy the harlot. They give their power and authority to the beast, and their united purpose is to make war with the Lamb. The outcome of that war is stated in one line: *the Lamb shall overcome them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they that are with him are called and chosen and faithful.* The issue is not in doubt.

Come Out of Her, My People

Chapter 18:4 provides the present application of prophecy: *Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues.* Prophecy is given when failure has come in — to shed light on the things that are coming under God's judgment, so that those with ears to hear might separate themselves now from what they know God will judge. The mystery of iniquity was already at work when Paul wrote. The system that will be Babylon in its full manifestation is still in development in Christendom today.

The call to come out is a present call — not to wait until the system is fully formed, but to be separate now from whatever partakes of its character. And when the rapture takes place, the cup of the Lord's table will be gone. The only cup left will be this one.

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