

Revelation 17:4–18

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

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. And when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration. And the angel said unto me, Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath seven heads and ten horns. The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.

Arrayed, Decked, and Adorned — What Clothes Do Not Change

Do ornaments make a woman different from what she was without them? The uniform answer of Scripture is that God requires truth in the inward parts. The wickedness of this woman is not made better by her ornaments — her blasphemy, her whoredoms, her fornications are not made pretty by the precious stones and pearls and gold with which she is decked. Purple speaks of imperial power; scarlet of earthly glory. These colours belong rightly to the Lord Jesus Christ, who was mockingly robed in them at His trial — and to whom they will belong in full truth when He reigns. This woman pretends to what is His.

The golden cup is full of abominations and filthiness. It is the bitter antitype of the cup of blessing which the Lord's people take, concerning which Paul asks: *is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?* Everything this woman wears and carries is a prostitution of what God has used in Scripture to set forth divine truth. The corruption of what is best is the worst corruption. This woman is the corruption of the most precious things — the truth of Christ and His bride — into a pretentious, seductive, worldly, and blood-guilty system.

Verse 5 — Corruption; Verse 6 — Violence

The two verses that follow offer a complete moral portrait. Verse 5: Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots and abominations. That is corruption — the same two great characteristics of sin for which the flood was brought in upon the earth. Verse 6: the woman drunken with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. That is violence. Corruption and violence — the essence of sin, residing together in this woman.

She calls herself heavenly, yet is fully entrenched with the world. That is the essence of her fornication. A professed spouse of Christ cultivating the world's protection, riding the beast, depending on civil power for her position — that is the spiritual harlotry the name expresses. The forehead in Scripture is associated with the thoughts — what comes out of a man's heart manifests itself in the forehead. The man with leprosy in his forehead in the Old Testament sets forth the working of sin in the thoughts. This woman wears on her forehead the name of what she really is.

She Is Drunken with Blood — Yet Claims No Guilt

The woman is drunken with the blood of the saints and of the witnesses of Jesus. She has not killed them herself, she would say. She turned them over to the secular arm. But Proverbs 30:20 describes exactly that manner of proceeding:

Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth and wipeth her mouth, and saith, I have done no wickedness. The evidence is wiped away. The guilt is denied. But God sees it, and He puts it on her account.

Revelation 18:24 confirms this: *in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all that were slain upon the earth.* Rome claims two swords — the spiritual and the secular. According to her own claim, God says: so be it. All the blood of all that were slain is upon her. And the Lord said of Jerusalem that upon that generation would come the blood of all the righteous from Abel onward. The principle runs through Scripture: God holds persons responsible for their claims and their conduct together.

The word translated martyrs in verse 6 is in Greek the word for witnesses — Darby renders it witnesses of Jesus. The emphasis falls not on how they died but on what they bore witness to. The blood was shed because of the testimony. Kill the messenger — but the message is what condemned the woman and what she could not tolerate.

John's Astonishment — and Why We Should Not Wonder

When John saw the woman, he wondered with great wonder. The angel's immediate response is: wherefore didst thou marvel? The admonition is pointed. There is something wrong with wondering at the anti-church — with giving it the acknowledgement of astonishment, as though its pretensions had some legitimate claim on one's attention. The Lord said, beware of the scribes who love the highest seats. The anti-church wears on its forehead names that belong to another. To wonder at it is to let those pretensions have their intended effect. The proper response is not wonder but separation.

The Beast That Was and Is Not — Moral Character of the Empire

The angel promises to tell John the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her — which has seven heads and ten horns. The beast that was and is not and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit: this is a moral characterisation of the beast, the stamp of its origin and end. It was — it carried the power of empire committed first to Nebuchadnezzar. It is not — in the sense that it came to a demise, and its power appeared spent. It shall ascend out of the abyss — its resuscitation comes from a satanic source, not a legitimate one. And it goes into perdition — its end is certain.

The earth-dwellers whose names are not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will wonder at this beast. The distinction from before the foundation of the world is maintained here as elsewhere: heavenly purposes are stated to be from before the foundation, earthly purposes from the foundation of the world. The apostates of Christendom belong to God's earthly purposes, and their names — not written — are also assessed from that standpoint. They are given over. There is no blessing for them.

Responsibility, Failure, and the Purpose of God

The whole pattern of what we see in chapters 17 and 18 follows a general principle that runs throughout Scripture: God first presents things to man in responsibility. Man manifests his moral state in his handling of what is entrusted. Then God takes it up in Christ and makes it good. Government was given to man at Noah. Israel was given the kingdom under David. The church was given a testimony in the world. Each of these has been held in responsibility, each has manifested its failure, and each will be taken up by the Lord Jesus to be made good when He comes. Shiloh was not Jerusalem — it was provisional, to bring out the state of the people. God never said, I chose Shiloh, as He said of Jerusalem. The provisional always precedes the permanent in God's ways with man.

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