

Revelation

*Part Forty-Six
The Lamb Will Overcome
(Revelation 17:1-18)*

With Study Questions

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10/9/2022*

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Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication." ³ So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast *which was* full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. ⁵ And on her forehead a name *was* written:

MYSTERY,
BABYLON THE GREAT,
THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF
THE EARTH

⁶ I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement. ⁷ But the angel said to me, "Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is. ⁹ "Here *is* the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. ¹⁰ There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, *and* the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. ¹¹ The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition. ¹² "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. ¹³ These are of one mind, and they will give

their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴ These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those *who are with Him are* called, chosen, and faithful." ¹⁵ Then he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. ¹⁶ And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. ¹⁷ For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. ¹⁸ And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth" (Revelation 17:1-18).

Introduction

It is not uncommon for people to feel boxed into their lives. Whether it is a difficult work environment, difficult family members, difficult health concerns, difficult economic concerns, etc., life can feel smothering. This is one reason why God calls us to observe the Lord's Day. We are called to breathe in, as it were, as we meditate upon our eternal sabbath rest (Hebrews 4:8-11). Specifically, fixing our hearts upon Christ who promises to give us rest (Matthew 11:28).

There is a vastness to this rest, for it includes "**every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places**" (Ephesians 1:3). Of course, this practice is not restricted to the Lord's Day. I know, for me, if I am feeling overwhelmed by the moments in life, I will go to the ocean and enjoy the horizon. In terms of God's creation, it is second only to the heavens in terms of its vastness. And, having lived here my entire life, there is a consistency (a sort of immutability) to it that I find restful. It is the big picture.

The Revelation is a sort of 'big picture' book at the end of the Bible. The seven churches initially receiving this letter were in a religious and political hornets' nest; far hotter than anything we westerners, even with all our frustrations, have had to endure. Our Lord was quite aware of the difficulty and the pull-the-temptation-these churches felt to compromise or even forsake the faith altogether.

Let us be reminded that the Revelation was not written that we might muse upon the fascinations of the end of the world, but that those in the

midst of difficulty might overcome and persevere. And to the extent that any generation of Christian might encounter similar difficulties, they are called to the same.

It is for this reason that John provides his three-point outline. In chapter one, we are given a vision of the glorified Christ that would (if I could say it this way) rapidly and gloriously divert my vision from the comfort of a sunset or difficulty of a tyrant (or any other distraction). The glories and powers of the world are no match for the glory and power of Christ.

In chapters two and three (part two of the outline) our Lord instructs on the specific strengths and weaknesses of the individual churches. God has a way, even to this day, of revealing to us our wicked ways that we might beseech Him to lead us **“in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:24)**.

Then, in chapters four through eighteen, God gives the very big picture of His deposing of those who tank rank against the Lord’s Anointed (Psalm 2:2) and against those who are His (Matthew 25:40). This deposing, or judgment, is presented by way of seals, trumpets and bowls of wrath.

The seven seals previewed the seven trumpets which would be a judgment against Jerusalem who had been in the practice of **“murder[ing] the prophets” (Matthew 23:31)**. The seven bowls change the focus to God’s judgment of the Roman Empire who, along with Jerusalem, crucified **“the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8; Acts 4:27)**.

Chapter sixteen concluded with the seventh bowl of wrath. Chapter seventeen can be seen as a supplement. It goes into greater detail regarding the conflict between **“the Lamb” (Revelation 17:14)** and the great evil of that era. Similar to chapter seventeen, we will not go into minute detail, but rather survey the chapter, highlighting portions that illuminate and concluding with the takeaway Christians should have in light of these things.

The Harlot and the Beast

The two main characters in this chapter are the harlot and the beast. I take this harlot to be the city of Rome¹ and the beast to be the Roman Empire. What is undeniable in this chapter is the evil nature and influence

¹ Some take the harlot to be Jerusalem, against which I have no strong objection.

of **“the great harlot.”** She currently sits on **“many waters”** indicating her flush condition (access to water and canals was a sign of cultural and political affluence). But this chapter details her **“judgment.”** Her harlotry² and influence of ungodliness and idolatry was universally intoxicating. Even though this intoxication is likely metaphorical, it can be very disconcerting how evil can violently possess someone’s disposition.

A fitting place for such a dark vision, John is carried away **“into the wilderness”** where he sees the woman sitting on a **“scarlet beast.”** As we learned in chapter thirteen, this beast is the Roman Empire in all its blasphemy and effort at self-deification. Again, some understand this to be the collaboration between Rome and Jerusalem in their persecution of the church, which is not a far-fetched idea. I still, for various reasons, lean toward this being the city of Rome and the Roman Empire³.

Either way, we see here of beautifully ugly picture. **“Purple and scarlet”** speak of royalty. **“Gold and precious stones and pearls”** speak of wealth. But her ostentatious golden cup is **“full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication.”** Everything about this woman-about this city-screams to distract us from godliness. Little wonder that the same author also wrote,

For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:16, 17).

We see on this woman (city) a name on her forehead. As we have learned elsewhere, the names on the forehead and the hand are not tattoos or computer chips, but a sign of who owns the person, who is controlling their hearts, thoughts and actions.

Rome and its Caesars had reached the acme of evil and were the source of the **“abominations of the earth.”** The drunkenness was not only that of fornication, but she was **“drunk with the blood of the saints and of the martyrs of Jesus.”** Worldly powers, be they social, political,

² Some argue that this language can only apply to Jerusalem because of how she forsook the covenant, but harlotry can extend to the prostitution of whatever is right. Nahum 3:4 speaks of Nineveh as a harlot and Isaiah 23:16, 17 of pagan city (Tyre) is in the same manner.

³ We will see in verse 12 that this includes outlying areas under Rome which will eventually turn on Rome.

educational, economic, etc., will not play fair. When the open exchange of ideas (Christian ideas) proves dismantling to ungodly power structures, those power structures will seek to remove all obstacles.

The Battle Rages

And though the initial application of these words apply to the first century, the battle rages. We have spoken periodically in this series of China. The biggest mistake the Communist government of China ever made, in an effort to appear magnanimous to the west, was to allow Bibles and churches to exist. They thought they could manage the government-run, and Communist controlled Three Self" churches. In these churches the Communist party decides how many people can be baptized, who gets to preach, what the focus of preaching should be. For example, preaching...

- **...on the resurrection of Christ is forbidden**
- **...on the Second Coming is forbidden**
- **...against religions that deny the deity of Christ is forbidden**
- **...that atheist Communist heroes went to hell is forbidden**
- **...denying that good Communists to go heaven is forbidden**
- **...against abortion is forbidden**

But the word of God was so powerful that Spirit indwelt believers would not capitulate. This all resulted in the underground church, where the members are routinely beaten, fined, arrested, tortured, sent to labor camp, killed or simply disappear.

All this to say that the Revelation, at least currently, might have a tighter application to our Chinese brothers and sisters than to us. But make no mistake, the bow in the west is being pulled back. Just recently a politician of high office quoted the words of Jesus, **"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31)**, in his defense of abortion. This is unmistakably a Satanic methodology. For a perverse use of Scripture was the tactic of the devil in his temptation of Christ in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11).

A Marvelous Evil

All of this caused John to **“marvel.”** This marveling likely included some confusion, so the angel volunteers to clear things up and reveal the **“mystery.”** He speaks of the beast, which is a bit of a review. The language is odd and maybe not as clear as we’d like. The beast **“that was, and is not, and yet is.”** This may beckon back to the teaching of how there was a mortal wound to the head of the beast, yet he was healed (Revelation 13:3). One Caesar would die, yet another takes his place. The death of a Caesar was not the death of the Empire.

In all of this the world is quite impressed. We are told that those **“whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world”** marvel at the beast. Here we see John’s Calvinism revealed. And it is not taught as a mere polemic, but that we might grasp the eternal nature of this enterprise we call life.

The Mind with Wisdom

In his explanation of the mystery, John once again uses the phrase, **“Here is the mind which has wisdom.”** This is yet another reason I believe John is writing about current events. He assumes there are readers of his letter who will be able to figure out who the characters of this drama actually are. John then gives one of the most clear and compelling explanations of who the beast is and when these things are taking place.

I realize the Revelation is no easy book. Every passage seems like a helium inflated balloon where the ribbons are slipping through our fingers as we seek to keep them nicely grouped. But what we are about to inspect should be clear to anyone who is willing to let their preconceptions go.

It has been universally recognized for thousands of years the Rome is the city on seven hills. So, when we read that **“the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits”** the most obvious reference is to Rome. This is no floating balloon, but a firmly planted post.

Add to this his reference to **“seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other is not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue for a short time.”** Not only is this a strong argument for the early dating of the Revelation (mid-60s), but it takes some work to avoid concluding that the readers (who had even a bit of wisdom) would know who John is referring to. Observe the order of the Caesars:

- **Julius**
- **Augustus**
- **Tiberius**
- **Caligula**
- **Claudius**
- **Nero (died in 68AD)**
- **Galba (Galba was killed 7 months after coming to power).**

Nero was the sixth Caesar.

The Overcoming Lamb

In verse twelve we see **“ten kings who received no kingdom as yet.”** Of course, the Roman Empire was fully a kingdom at that time, so these were provinces which, at some level, served the beast (especially in its **“war with the Lamb”**) but would eventually turn on the city of Rome and make her **“desolate.”**

An accurate reading of Scripture will often require a sound grasp of theological concepts we’ve learned elsewhere in Scripture. We learned, for example, in our study of Habakkuk that God can raise up evil nations to judge other evil nations. We see a similar action here. These surrounding nations which will turn on the Roman Empire are not seeking to serve and honor God. Yet **“God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose.”**

The evil harlot, the evil Roman Empire and the surrounding evil provinces all **“make war with the Lamb.”** We then read something that must have been astonishing to the original readers. And it should be astonishing (in a marvelous sort of way) to us

...and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful (Revelation 17:14).

It is the nature of ungodly structures (whether religious, political, familiar, cultural, educational, etc.) to become a house divided. And Jesus was not unclear that a house divided **“will not stand” (Matthew 12:25).** Every letter in the LGBTQ is beginning to aim at each other’s throats. The lawsuits and arguments over who owns the COEXIST logo are sadly ironic.

Dictators killing their own military and staff is almost a proverb. As someone once said, the enemy that Christians are called to battle is itself unwittingly suicidal.

There is both a historical and eternal overcoming that belongs to those who are **“called, chosen and faithful.”** Again, this is not some new doctrine found in Revelation, but basic Christianity. Will Christians suffer? Yes. But their suffering will be productive. In history, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church—a church which will endure until the end of time. As the Westminster Confession, 25, 5 teaches,

The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.

The call in Revelation is that we ever strive to remain faithful. For the Lamb overcomes more than the evil structures and nations in history. He overcomes death itself. And His victory becomes our victory, when we put our trust in Him—when we persevere in our faith.

Questions for Study

1. Explain some of the reasons God has instituted the Lord's Day (page 3)?
2. In what ways is the Revelation a 'big picture' book and how is that helpful to us (pages 3, 4)?
3. Review the three-part outline of Revelation and explain the goals of each part (page 4).
4. Who are the harlot and the beast and what are their characteristics (pages 4, 5)?
5. How does the battle the first century church fought continue to rage to this day (page 6)?
6. What internal evidence does this chapter provide to help us understand when this book was written and who it was talking about (pages 7, 8)?
7. What are the means by which the Lamb overcomes? What does He overcome? How do you know you're included (pages 8, 9)?