

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, 9-1-13 PM NOTES
"THE FINAL FALSE RELIGION"
REVELATION 17:1-18
#25 in Series, "Verse-by-Verse Through Revelation"

2 Corinthians 11:2 (NKJV) "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present *you* as a chaste virgin to Christ."

Revelation 19:7-8 (ESV) ⁷Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; ⁸it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure."

Religion will not cease when the true church is caught up to be with the Lord. Religion will flourish during the great tribulation.

"Suddenly [following September 11, 2001], the cultural hostility to faith went up in smoke when Americans faced real pain and spiritual need. This was a good sign. And yet, in the well intentioned 'interfaith prayer services,' a more disturbing note was sounded. Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus were all worshipping together, praying, it was said, 'to the same God.' Such multi-faith worship may be the beginning of the much-anticipated 'one world religion' which, though filled with pious emotionalism and religiosity, will be far different from Christianity." —Edward Veith

I. The Character of the Final False Religion (vv. 1-4)

This woman, this harlot, is a world-wide false religious system or "church."

Revelation 13:1 (NKJV) "Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name."

Revelation 17:4b (HCSB) "She had a gold cup in her hand filled with everything vile and with the impurities of her prostitution."

II. The Children of the Final False Religion (v. 5)

A mystery is a truth previously concealed, but now revealed.

This mystery Babylon revealed in Revelation 17 is not a city, but a religious system that is rooted in the false religion of ancient Babylon (Babel).

III. The Conduct of the Final False Religion (v. 6)

Revelation 17:6 (HCSB) "Then I saw that the woman was drunk on the blood of the saints and on the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was utterly astounded."

IV. The Companions of the Final False Religion (vv. 7-14)

Mountains are sometimes used in the Old Testament to symbolize rule or power (Psalm 30:7; Isaiah 2:2; Daniel 2:35).

The five empires that had fallen in John's time are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The one "that is" would obviously be the Roman Empire. The one that "has not yet come" would be the Antichrist's kingdom.

Revelation 19:19-20 (NKJV) "19 And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. 20 Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone."

We are **chosen** in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), **called** in time by the Father to come to the Son in repentance and faith (John 6:44), and then demonstrate our saving faith by being **faithful** until death.

V. The Calamity of the Final False Religion (vv. 15-18)

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All that is called the "church" is not the true church. The Greek word translated "church" literally means "the called out ones". The true church is made up of those who have been called out of spiritual death, called out of a vain way of living, called out of Adam and called out to be one with Christ – united to Him by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). The true church is made up of those called out of death into life, called out of darkness into light, and called out of hopelessness into hope. I would be surprised if even 25% of those calling themselves the church are actually the church. The true church is going to be taken out of this world just before the great tribulation breaks out on the earth. While many – probably even millions are going to be saved during this 7 year tribulation, most will be martyred. Even after the true church is caught up to be with the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17), there will be an organization called the church that will keep functioning here on the earth. Christ won't be in it, because it will be a tool that the false prophet will use to accomplish the bringing about of the world empire of the first beast – the antichrist. It is this false church that John writes about in Revelation 17.

Chapters 17, 18 of Revelation are an interlude. In chapter 16 we saw the 7 bowl judgments being poured out on the earth. Chronologically, after Revelation 16:21, Jesus Christ returns to wipe out His enemies and set up His earthly millennial kingdom. In chapters 17-18 of Revelation, John gives us an interlude to explain what happens to this false church and to the political system of government and economics that the antichrist has set up. The emphasis of chapters 17-18 is not so much God's judgments as it is what is being judged.

The true church is described in the New Testament as a pure virgin. **2 Corinthians 11:2 (NKJV)** "For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present *you as a chaste virgin to Christ.*" We see the true church in **Revelation 19:7-8 (ESV)** "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride [the true church] has made herself ready; ⁸it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure". We see the true church pictured as a pure virgin – the bride of Christ, but how is the false church pictured or symbolized here in chapter 17? It is pictured as a harlot, a prostitute. Religion will not cease when the true church is caught up to be with the Lord. Religion will flourish during the great tribulation. What flourishes is not the true church; it is a false church, a false religion that tries to combine the teachings of all religions. God calls this tribulation church, the harlot, the prostitute. It will be made up of unsaved Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Baptists as well as people from all the world religions that have come under the same big tent. Gene Edward Veith writing in *World Magazine* (October 20, 2001) shows how this harlot, this false church will come about. We saw a foretaste of it after 9-11-01. "Suddenly, [following September 11, 2001] the cultural hostility to faith went up in smoke when Americans faced real pain and spiritual need. This was a good sign. And yet, in the well intentioned 'interfaith prayer services,' a more disturbing note was sounded. Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus were all worshipping together, praying, it was said, 'to the same God'. Such multi-faith worship may be the beginning of the much-anticipated 'one world religion' which, though filled with pious emotionalism and religiosity, will be far different from Christianity."

The theme, then of this vision in chapter 17 is the final world religion pictured as a harlot or a prostitute.

I. The Character of the Final False Religion (V1-4)

One of the angels that would pour out the bowl of God's wrath that we saw in the last message gives John an invitation to come and see what God will do with the beast's false religious system. John sees a woman representing the last form of man-made religion. This woman is pictured as a harlot who sits on many waters. What are the "many waters" in verse 1? When you don't understand something in the Bible it is good to just keep reading. Many times it is made clear a little later. We read in **Revelation 17:15 (NKJV)** "Then he said to me, 'The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.'" The word "sits" refers to a position of influence, authority and sovereignty. The phrase "many waters" does not refer here to the harlot's geographical location. Instead, as we read in Revelation 17:15, it refers to "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues [languages]". The symbolism here speaks of the harlot dominating the peoples of the earth. This woman, this harlot, is a world-wide false religious system or "church".

What is the angel referring to when he speaks of the kings of the earth becoming drunk with the wine of her fornication (sexual immorality)? This speaks of idolatry and compromising unholy alliances between governments and leaders with this false church, this harlot. The harlot will actually have such seductive influence with the political leaders that she will control them.

In Revelation 17:3 we see the picture of this woman, this harlot riding on a scarlet beast. We met this beast back in chapter 13. **Revelation 13:1 (NKJV)** "Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name." This scarlet beast is none other than the antichrist, the beast, the world ruler. The symbolism here shows us that the woman (false religion) at first seems to be using and controlling the antichrist. As we will see in a moment, it is really the other way around – the beast is using the harlot.

Notice the harlot's wealth in verse 4. Prostitutes usually dress to call attention to themselves. That is exactly what this woman representing false religion does. Purple and scarlet were the colors of royalty, wealth, and they were usually worn by people of influence. She is sending out a message of her own importance. In addition, she is adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. This vision must have shocked John. The only church he knew, the true first century church was despised, persecuted, poor, and hated. This false church is wealthy beyond description and seems for a time to control the government. We see John saying in **Revelation 17:6b (NKJV)** "And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement."

The harlot also had a golden cup in her hand. What is in the cup? **Revelation 17:4b (HCSB)** "She had a gold cup in her hand filled with everything vile and with the impurities of her prostitution." The golden cup speaks again of her wealth, but it is filled with that which is filthy and immoral. Using the symbolism consistently, the contents of the cup symbolize idolatry, spiritual fornication, and false teaching.

II. The Children of the Final False Religion (V5)

Prostitutes in the ancient world often wore a headband with their name on it (Jeremiah 3:3). This harlot is definitely not ashamed of herself. What is the name of this harlot? It is "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." This means that she has a name which is a mystery – "Babylon". A mystery is a truth previously concealed, but now revealed. This false religion is like a mother that has many daughters that are just like her! This mother (which means source or origin) is the fountainhead, the womb that bears all false religion and idolatry on earth. It seems from multiple historical sources that most all false religion was founded in the ancient city of Babylon where the tower of Babel was built in Genesis 11.

A book that many Bible scholars look to as accurate history concerning the origin of most false religion is the book, *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop. He traces the development of this "mystery Babylon" in Revelation 17:5 through the years and the centuries to this present day. Certainly what he says is not on the level of Scripture, but historically I believe that it is accurate. Let me summarize a little of what he says.

Nimrod (introduced to us in Genesis 10:8-10) built a huge tower made of sun-dried bricks, known as a ziggurat, on the plains of Shinar (Gen. 11:4). The tower was recognized as a temple or rallying center and a symbol of mankind's pride and rebellion against God. God poured out judgment on this rebellious act by confounding their language and scattering them across the face of the earth (Gen. 11:7-9). However, this did not mean the demise of the Babylonian religious system. Ancient historical sources [not Scripture] records that Nimrod's wife, Semiramis, became the head priestess of an idolatrous system of secret religious rituals known as Babylonian Mysteries. Babylon became the fountainhead of idolatry and the mother of pagan systems that spread across the world. Semiramis supposedly gave birth to a son named Tammuz, who was miraculously conceived by a sunbeam. He was presented to the people as a savior. Tradition says that Tammuz was killed by a wild boar, but after a 40-day fast he was resurrected from the dead on the feast of Ishtar. This legend of a mother-son cult became part of the Babylonian mystery ritual and was quickly included in other idolatrous religious practices worldwide. The mother-son cult was headed by a priesthood that promoted salvation by means of sprinkling holy water, ceremonial cleansing, and purgatorial cleansing after death. Semiramis established an order of virgins dedicated to religious prostitution. She became known and worshipped as the "queen of heaven." Ezekiel condemned the practice of Jewish women "weeping for Tammuz" (Ezek. 8:14). Jeremiah condemned Judah for offering cakes and burning incense to the "queen of heaven" (Jer. 7:18; 44:17-19, 25). Zechariah personified wickedness as a woman who will be reestablished in the land of Shinar (Babylon) in the latter days (Zechariah 5:6-11). After the Medo-Persian Empire took over Babylon, the city and temples were eventually destroyed. However, the Babylonian cult survived and found a new home in Pergamos of Asia Minor. It thrived and eventually was headquartered in Rome. The chief priests wore miters shaped like the head of a fish, in honor of Dagon, the fish-god, the lord of life – another form of the Tammuz mystery. In Rome the chief priest took the title Pontifex Maximus. When Julius Caesar became head of the Roman

Empire, he took the name Pontifex Maximus, a title held by all of the Roman emperors down to Constantine the Great, who became head of both church and state. The title was later adopted by the Bishop of Rome. Over time, the church in Rome absorbed many of the Babylonian practices and idolatrous teachings, obscuring the true meaning of Scripture. Many of these teachings can be attributed to Constantine, who combined paganism with Christianity when he adopted Christianity as a state religion [Adapted from summary in Danny Aiken Sermon, “The New Age Movement Is Not New” <http://www.danielakin.com>].

By the time of the Reformation, many of these ancient myths had been assimilated into the visible church. The Reformation was a “back to the Bible movement”. The difference in what happened in history and what will happen during this time of tribulation is that in the tribulation, there will also be an assimilation of other world religions into a one world religion. There are already many efforts to bring this about in our day. This mystery Babylon revealed in Revelation 17 is not a city but a religious system that is rooted in the false religion of ancient Babylon (Babel).

III. The Conduct of the Final False Religion (V6)

Like many harlots, this woman was drunk, but not from alcohol. She is drunk “...with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” This false religion has and will kill many of God’s true saints. The primary application is to those who are saved during the great tribulation. History shows that apostate Christianity has been responsible for the deaths of countless thousands of God’s saints. This killing will only be ramped up during the great tribulation. The HCSB records John’s response in clear language. **Revelation 17:6 (HCSB)** “Then I saw that the woman was drunk on the blood of the saints and on the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was utterly astounded.”

IV. The Companions of the Final False Religion (V7-14)

Remember back in verse 3 that we saw the harlot riding on the beast – the antichrist. Now John focuses on this union. This is the ultimate union of church and state. Verses 8-13 sound rather confusing with the first reading, but let’s unwrap the truth of these verses. We saw back in chapter 13 that the beast (the antichrist) will seem to be dead and then have a seemingly miraculous resurrection. It will be phony, but because of it many will follow and even worship him. About 13 years ago I was on a mission trip in Hanoi, North Viet Nam. The man who was hosting us took us to a sort of museum to see the preserved body of Ho Chi Minh the president of North Vietnam 1945-1969. “Uncle Ho” as the people of Vietnam call him was laying there under a glass covering. What would happen if through some kind of trickery that body got up and walked? He would be worshipped! That is something of what we see with the antichrist. Those whose names are written in the Book of Life are the ones who will refuse to worship the beast and his image; they are the elect who will remain true to Jesus Christ until death. Those whose names are not in the book of life will follow and worship this beast, this antichrist.

In verse 9 John tells us what the seven heads of the beast symbolize. They symbolize seven mountains which are seven kings we are told in verse 10. Mountains are sometimes used in the Old Testament to symbolize rule or power (Psalm 30:7; Isaiah 2:2; Daniel 2:35). I cannot be dogmatic, but I believe that this represents seven world empires embodied in their leaders. What does verse 10 mean? The five empires that had fallen in John’s time are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The one that is would obviously be the Roman Empire. The one that has not yet come would be the Antichrist’s kingdom. These kingdoms did not literally rule the whole world, but each was the greatest and most powerful kingdom of their time. That is especially true in relation to Israel, the chosen people of God.

We see in verse 10 that when the antichrist and his kingdom come, he will only rule a short time. To be exact, it will be 3 ½ years. What does verse 11 mean? How can the antichrist (the beast) be one of the seven and also the eighth? He will be one of the seven kings before his fake death and resurrection, and after this phony resurrection he will be the eighth – especially in the last 42 months of the tribulation. John can’t hold back from telling us the ultimate destination of this evil ruler called “antichrist”. He will go to “perdition” which means destruction. It speaks of the lake of fire.

Verse 12 explains that the 10 horns represent a confederation of 10 kings that will have authority under the antichrist. Their time of power and influence will be for “one hour” with the beast. That is a figure of speech that emphasizes the brevity of and the pre-determined time of their rule. The reason their time in the spotlight will be short is because their authority is tied in to the antichrist who will have a short rule. God both knows and has set this hour. Verse 13 tells us that their goals and their ambitions are the same as those of the antichrist. We see in verse 14 that their goals and ambitions are to make war with the Lamb. They picked the wrong opponent! The fulfillment of what verse 14 refers to is described in **Revelation 19:19-20 (NKJV)** “¹⁹ And I saw the beast, the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against Him who sat on the horse and against His army. ²⁰ Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone.” The beast and all of his armies will be no match for the one who is Lord of lords and King of kings! John mentions those with the Lamb of God in that final battle. He tells us that those with the Lamb are the called, chosen, and faithful. That without a doubt refers to believers who return with the Lord – that’s us! What a description of a true disciple of Christ. We are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4), called in time by the Father to come to the Son in repentance and faith (John 6:44), and then demonstrate our saving faith by being faithful until death.

V. The Calamity of the Final False Religion (V15-18)

It will turn out that the antichrist and his allies will just use the harlot (false one world religion) until they discern that they don’t need her any more, and then they will turn on her and devour her. The coming scenario reminds me of a poem from my childhood about the lady from Niger.

She sailed away, on a lovely summer’s day

On the back of a crocodile.

“You see” said she, “he’s as tame as tame can be,

I’ll ride him down the Nile.”

The croc winked his eye, and the lady waved “goodbye,”

Wearing a happy smile.

At the end of the ride, the lady was inside,

And the smile on the crocodile!

Having used the false religious system to help him gain control of the world, the antichrist will now discard her after taking her riches and resources. The antichrist will then strip her exposing all of her vileness. He then completely destroys this false religion so he has no competition. This will seem to be a idea originated by the antichrist and his cohorts, but it will all be the fulfilling of God’s providential plans (V17). Before Christ comes to establish His millennial kingdom, the harlot (false religion) must be destroyed as well as the kingdom of the antichrist. He uses the antichrist to destroy the harlot and Christ Himself destroys the antichrist. All things are ultimately under God’s control.

Don’t be discouraged when false religion seems to flourish. We now know its final end.