

“The Last Babylon”
Revelation 17-18
March 15, 1998
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Consider it fair warning - some of the language I will use today will be somewhat indelicate.

I have found it difficult to express what John is expressing without using his language - and his language is earthy.

I also believe very firmly that John's choice of words and the mental pictures he creates are intentionally shocking.

He wants his readers attention.

The book of Revelation is a book of big ideas and of large pictures.

It stands back from life and looks at it in perspective.

It paints the elements of life in bold relief so they can be clearly seen.

It makes us ask and answer big questions - questions about life and death - about who we are, what we are doing and where we are going.

It doesn't let us just get up and brush our teeth, go to work, take a lunch break and watch the evening news.

It pushes the “why” and “what” questions in our faces.

It paints life in big bold colors and bizarre pictures -

It uses startling and exaggerated language to point out what should be obvious to us but can too easily get lost in the details of life.

*Author Flannery O'Connor was asked why she created such bizarre characters in her stories and she replied **that for the nearly blind you have to draw very large, simple caricatures.** (in Peterson p146)

John must have thought us “nearly blind”.

Political cartoonists today do that very thing.

They exaggerate the physical features of a person or a place to make it obvious what they are talking about and what they think about it.

In our day if a political cartoonist draws a picture of a ferocious bear hovering over tiny republic we know immediately he or she is telling us something about the Russians and the little country of Chechna.

John uses words to paint a political cartoon.

His cartoon is not a bit funny - it is deadly serious, it is a striking commentary on life in the tribulation, and our lives today, and it communicates a great warning.

Before we look at this political cartoon I want to ask you some questions that I hope will keep you mindful throughout the sermon of why John describes what he does.

*What in life is most attractive to you?

What do you seek from life?

What is so important to you in life that you are giving your time, your energy and your money to accomplish?

Put a little differently:

Who are you serving in life?

You will serve someone.

Who are you believing?

You will believe someone.

*Not asked but stated, Joshua, 3500 years ago, put it this way:

"Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your forefathers... or the gods of (the land in which you are living). But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15

*I believe the central question John is posing in chapters 17-18 of Revelation is this:
Who will you serve with your life?

I believe that is the question that we are to answer because of what I believe to be the key verse in the entire passage:

*18:4 "Then I heard another voice from heaven say: Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues."

Whoever "she" is in that verse, John is saying you don't want to serve her because of what she does and where she's going.

And who is she? That's what the political cartoon is about.

*In chapter 17 John paints a word picture of a great prostitute sitting on a blood-red beast with seven heads and ten horns covered with blasphemous names.

Put that political cartoon in the Denver Post and it would get everyone's attention.

But what does it mean - what is this picture supposed to communicate?

John leaves nothing to chance - in chapter 17 he spells out exactly who these exaggerated caricatures represent and in chapter 18 he repeats a long poem the angel tells him - a poem that describes what happens.

*For those of you who like outlines, here is the way I wish to explain this text today:

Who is this prostitute?

What is her desire?

What means does she use to accomplish her desire?

What ultimately happens to her?

And how do we respond?

*First of all then who is this prostitute?

*In 17:1 we read: "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters.

We'll get to "who" she is in a minute but first of all why does John picture her as a prostitute?

The word prostitute is often used in the Bible in connection with unfaithfulness to God.

The Lord God often referred to his own people this way - he loved them, betrothed them, cared for them, took them into his home and yet they forsook him, chased after other gods and gave themselves and even what God had given them to others.

*Cf Isaiah 1:21 "See how the faithful city (Jerusalem) has become a **harlot!** She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her - but now murderers... Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts."

Often in the OT there are references to cities and to kingdoms as "prostitutes".

And time and time again you see that the word is not so much a reference to human sexuality as to spiritual unfaithfulness to God.

*Cf. Nahum 1:1 "A oracle concerning Nineveh...The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; 3:1 Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims... all because of the wanton lust of the **harlot**, alluring, the **mistress** of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her **prostitution...**"

*Cf. Isaiah 23:15 "At the end of seventy years, the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a **prostitute** and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.

This prostitute takes what belongs to God and gives it to another.

And again I emphasize the issue is not about sex - it is about who and what you are giving yourself to in life.

*But again **who** is this prostitute?

John tells us:

*v1 "She sits on many waters" which later (cf v15) are identified as "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and

languages." This prostitute has control over the world.

v2 "The kings of the earth...and the inhabitants of the earth..." consort with her. This prostitute has dealings with the nations of the world.

v3 She was "sitting on a scarlet beast" Whoever she is she is again pictured as in alliance with the nations of the world - the beast who is described for us in chapter 13 and here in chapter 17.

v4 she is wealthy and powerful

v6 she has killed the saints.

This "prostitute" in Revelation is not referring to a person but to a way of life - a whole way of thinking about life and living it out.

*What does the prostitute represent?

She represents what other NT writers call "the world".

*Rom 12:2 "do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world..."

*1 Jn 2:15 "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

*This prostitute is symbolic of the world's way of thinking and acting without God.

And according to John the prostitute is symbolic of a city.

*v18 "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." Just as Baghdad stands for Iraq - Saddam Hussein included - so this prostitute symbolizes the center of the entire world-controlling system during the tribulation.

But notice she is also called "Babylon"

*v5 she is called "mystery Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth." She is identified as the Babylon which is described in chapter 18 more fully - a city, an empire, an economic and social system that ruled with wealth, power and cruelty to God's people. (see chapter 18)

Why "Babylon"? - Babylon was in actuality the city/empire that overthrew Jerusalem/Judah in 606BC and carried the people into captivity. With the conquest of Jerusalem, temple worship ceased, the people of God were in exile, and the great nation of Israel that had been the promised land and led by King David at the height of its prestige and power was now in ruins.

Babylon, the city/empire, and even the word "Babylon" became symbolic for the evil of the world against the people of God.

*"Babylon" became a euphemism for the enemy.

Call any city or government "Babylon" and everyone knew what you meant - it was evil - it was your opposition.

By the time the NT was written Babylon had been long gone but that name was applied to any enemy of the people of God.

*So she is called a "prostitute" because she leads people astray.

She is called "Babylon" because she is the evil enemy of God's people.

Let me attempt to put this evil empire in chronological perspective for you.

*Chapter 13 introduced us to the evil empire that will rule the world in the few years just before Jesus comes again.

That world-wide governmental/religious system will be led by the two beasts of chapter 13, the antichrist and the false prophet.

Chapter 14 jumped ahead to describe some of what would happen when Jesus does come again.

Chapters 15-16 then went back, as we saw last week, to describe the last plagues that God would pour out on the earth just before and as Jesus comes again.

Chapter 19:11 and following will describe the second coming.

What we have in chapters 17 and 18 is more of what that world-government discussed in Chapter 13 would be like - and particularly its destruction.

One more look at who she is tells us this:

*17:3 "There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns."

*When we compare that with chapter 13 where the "beast" is clearly symbolic of a world-wide governmental/religious system that rules the whole world, we then see that the prostitute is the capitol city, or the center of that evil government.

*And what is this prostitute's desire?

*17:6 tells us: "I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus."

Her desire is to destroy the people of God.

*And 17:14 tells us: "(She and the others) will make war against the Lamb."

This prostitute and the beast, symbolic of that evil empire at the end of the age, and all those they bring into alliance with them described symbolically *as (17:12) "the ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the *beast" have one purpose: (17:13-14)"They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast - They

will make war against the Lamb.”

God has created us to be in relationship with him - to worship him.

"The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Satan's design from the beginning has been to thwart that plan of God, that purpose of God for all people.

Another way of describing her purpose is by simply describing the woman as a prostitute - she wants to get people and especially God's people to use themselves for purposes other than for what they were created.

If she can get them to follow her instead of God - she has accomplished her aim.

*We come now to the means she uses to accomplish her plans to destroy people.

John clearly gives this a lot of ink in his description.

Basically what she does is offer people a cheap substitute for the real thing.

She lures them with temporal riches instead of eternal wealth.

She entices them with passing power instead of everlasting significance.

She offers us the here and now, immediate gratification, instead of lasting peace and joy.

In chapter 18 when the people of the world are lamenting her downfall - and chapter 18 is a poem, a song, describing her ruin - notice what they miss about her:

18:3 "the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.

18:9 "the kings of the earth... shared her luxury

18:12-13 "Cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble; "cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horse and carriages; and bodies and souls of men. (estimated 60,000,000 slaves in Roman Empire)

15 "The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her

16 "dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. such great wealth

18b "was there ever a city like this great city?

23 "Your merchants were the world's great men.

*What did she lure them with?

Affluence and influence!

She got them to chase after everything the world has to offer instead of pursuing God.

She got them to sell their souls for a little more education, a little more money, a little larger home, a little more power, a little higher position in the company.

I don't know how to apply this today.
How does the "whore" seduce you?

What does she offer that would lead you away from God?
What does she promise that is ultimately a lie even if immediately it appears so good?
How does she insinuate herself into your confidence?

Is it money?

Does she so tantalize you with things that you wind up giving your life for those things?
Has she convinced you to put a picture of a Ferrari or something else on your refrigerator and then strive to achieve it?
Has she made you so fearful of the future that a retirement fund that can handle every emergency is the driving force of your life and "trusting" God is a hollow concept.

Has she turned your head to other things so you can't give or only give out of a grudging duty.

Is it prestige, being somebody, being known, recognition?

Education becomes not a means for learning but for getting somewhere.
Jobs are not for doing something well and providing a service but for getting promoted, getting recognition, getting ahead - especially ahead of others.
Class reunions aren't for enjoying old friendships but for comparisons - to make certain we aren't fatter, older looking, poorer, or less educated than the average.

If the prostitute could offer enough of the world that people think they don't need God then she has them hooked.

Babylon was a great place to live, sleeping with the whore wasn't all bad until you realize what it kept you from and where it led.

*Author Eugene Peterson using the same earthy language that John uses describes the deception this way:

"The terrible thing about the whore is not that she takes strangers to bed with her, but that once getting them there she uses her body to lie about life: There is no joining of lives, only of (bodies). The exploration and development of our unique human identity, of which sex is the physical means, is replaced by elaborate and deceiving fantasies. A fundamental impoverishment of person is accomplished behind a seductive spell of perfumes, silks and flatteries. Whoredom uses sex to lie about life: The truth of life is that love is a gift, that relationships are commitments, that sexuality is the sacrament of (human) spirituality. The whore's lie is that love is purchased, that

relationships are 'deals', that sexuality is appetite. Whoredom is the use of the good to do evil; the use of a good body to demean the person, the use of the means of realizing our identity to depersonalize identities. The great wrong in whoredom is not sexual immorality (although it is that) but spiritual sacrilege." Peterson 146-147)

The great prostitute takes the good things of life and uses them to turn us away from God - to get us to focus on getting for ourselves - now!

*WHAT ARE YOU PURSUING IN LIFE?

Have you gone into the whorehouse of the world's values to find it or into God's house. Do you seek life's fulfillments in the arms of the great prostitute or in the arms of God.

*The prostitute, the world, seduces with the allure of power and wealth but what will happen to her?

John already described for us in chapter 14 that the world would be harvested like so many grapes and thrown into the winepress of God's wrath.

That those who pledge their allegiance to the world's ways will be forever punished.

And chapter 18 is a funeral dirge for the whole system and those who followed it. It is a song lamenting the greatness of the fall of the great prostitute.

*2 "She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every kind of evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.

7 "Give her as much torture and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself.

8 "Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her; death, mourning and famine. She will be consumed by fire, for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

The politicians and businessmen who had gotten fat off their alliance with this world system lamented the downfall of the Prostitute/Babylon:

9 "When the kings of the earth who have committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her.

10 "Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come.

21 "Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said, 'With such violence the great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again.

John is saying in the strongest language imaginable - the prostitute is going down.

She may have all the appearances of strength, and influence and wealth.

She may appear to offer everything a person could ever want.

But she is going down.

She offers a counterfeit life but her destruction is real.

And so John's warning is urgent!

*"Come out of her so you will not share in her sins...or receive any of her plagues."(18:4)

*Two reasons to separate:

1. So you won't fall into her ways.
2. So you won't reap her consequences.

In Revelation 17-18 John is describing what the world-wide governmental/religious system led by the antichrist will be like and how certain is its destruction.

But that description according to John fits not only that day that will come but fits this present day as well.

*John wrote earlier, "(There) is the spirit of antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world." I Jn 4:3b

Though it will be even more seductive and powerful than, we are today faced with the deceits of the prostitute - the lie that she offers life when what she offers is death.

Are you pursuing God with your life or are you following the prostitute?

*"Choose you this day whom you will serve, whether the gods of your forefathers... or the gods of (the land in which you are living). But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Joshua 24:15