

A Tale Of Two Cities

Series: Theology In Pictures

by Steve Zeisler

In our first two studies on the Book of Revelation, one characteristic has been true: John displayed before us the picture, the "slide" of what he saw, but in each case our visual first impression was misleading. In chapter 5, for instance, John was told to look for the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but instead he saw a fragile Lamb, bearing the marks of slaughter. The Lamb looked out of place in the throne- room of heaven, and yet, in reality, it was that Lamb who enabled us, the rebel creation, to belong in heaven. Then last week we talked about the fiery dragon of chapter 12. Our first impression might have led us to fear defeat by the dragon, yet, as we looked more closely, we saw that we are made to be overcomers, victors in our battle with Satan.

Our subject this morning, temptation, how it works, how it affects us, will have the same pattern to it. The tempter's image, and the heart of the process of temptation itself, is illusion and fraud. The Bible is very clear. Sin always pays; "the wages of sin is death," but the offer is never made that way. It wants us to believe that the paycheck will include respect, or security, or pleasure, as if it were your right to have these things and you are only claiming your rights by carrying out some activity or making some statement. The offer is always made as if it were to your advantage, that it would somehow serve your interests to follow up on whatever the temptation is suggesting.

That whole network of enticements is what is pictured for us in chapter 17 of Revelation, in the double figure of a city and a woman. The system that makes up Babylon, the city, and "the mother of harlots," the woman, is rather like a velvet covering over a steel hook- the hook is deadly, but it does not look like it; it seems to offer us something that will be to our advantage. That whole process of covering over the deadly nature of sin is what John sees pictured in this chapter of Revelation.

And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying "Come here, I shall show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waster, with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality." And he carried me- way In the Spirit Into a wilderness and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet besot, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was clothed In purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having In her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality, and upon her forehead a name was written, a mystery, "Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Of The Abomination Of The Earth." And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus And when I saw her, I wondered greatly.

We can identify some of the things we see here. The phrase, "kings of the earth," probably refers to leaders of thought, men and women of influence in the world who set the trend, who call the tune for the rest of us. In one sense, though, the "kings of the earth" really are all the men and women who ever lived. When God created the world, he gave humanity the privilege of ruling, of controlling and populating and caring for the earth, so in some sense the destiny of all of us ought to be to rule. Yet the "kings of the earth," as John sees them here, are the consorts of the harlot. The city is an appropriate metaphor to use when talking about what is happening among human beings. Cities, in the modern as well as the ancient world, always represent a concentration of people, brought together in close proximity, so that whatever is true of them is displayed in graphic, unmistakable terms. Now Babylon represents undiluted evil, but, as we will see in a moment, John is going to teach us about another city, the City of God, and what we will see concentrated there is righteousness rather than wickedness.

There are at least five things we can discern from this description of Babylon, the harlot; five specific kinds of enticements are presented to us that all of us will recognize as soon as we hear them. They have been present throughout history, and they are present today. One is sexual passion, pleasure, all that goes with wild expressions of our sexuality. That is clearly one of the offers that is involved. The second is the love of power, the desire for it. That is represented by the fact that she is sitting on a horrendous looking beast. In the rest of the chapter John makes it clear that the beast is really a world empire that will exist in the final days of earth's history. It is controlled by ten very evil servants of Satan, and this beast, the empire and its leaders, are supporting the woman. They are giving her a place of prominence, riding on their backs, so what she has to offer, to some extent, is power, prominence, strength. A third thing she offers is intoxication. She is drunk. She offers the mind-- massaging experience of an altered state of consciousness. Drunkenness, drugs, anything that sells the experience of fantasy and escape are offered to the citizens of this city.

A fourth thing is beauty. The woman is clothed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls. She is regally attired, attractive and beautiful. None of us in today's world can possibly be unaware of the "me" generation's desire for physical beauty, the excessive concern to look and feel and adorn ourselves so that we stand out and call attention to ourselves. I think we as Christians suffer at this point more than we realize. There is a whole system of Christian beauty tips and wardrobe hints that, when taken to excess, become an end in themselves. This is participating in Babylon.

The fifth thing we can discern from this description has to do with the gold cup she is holding in her hand containing a horrible draught. We read that in her cup are "abominations and the unclean things of her immorality" (verse 4), and then, in verse 6, about her being drunk with "the blood of the witnesses of Jesus." Apparently there is some combination of perversion and violence that she has mixed together as a drink for herself and to offer to her friends. Again, we do not have to think very long before we discover that the same combination of things are offered everywhere in our world. It strikes me that the number of rapes reported in our newspapers in recent years has risen dramatically. Some men have preyed upon scores of innocent women and used them as victims of their distorted desires. This is the combination of violence and perversion. Abortion rights advocates often champion the cause of casual and irresponsible sex at the cost of the lives of innocent victims. This also is sexual license and violence combined. We read of the growth of the child pornography industry, the molesting of children, etc. This is part of the world we live in. Whatever is in her cup is being drained by thousands, perhaps millions, in our culture, and it is increasing in its frequency as people's outrage over these things decreases. Now the prima Christian weapon, when faced with the temptress, with the enticements and attractions and baits that this con artist offers, is the truth, taken hold of by faith. Turn to chapter 18. In that chapter is a tearing away of the mask. Sin's offer purportedly will do you some good, will provide some advantage to you in terms of beauty, escape or power, but what John sees in chapter 18 is the real destiny, the real condition of the harlot. It is important for us to know these things. If you are going to buy her wares, if you are going to take advantage of what she offers, you are also going to get more than you intended.

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illumined with his glory. And he cried out with a mighty voice, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! And she has become a dwelling place of demons and a prison of every unclean spirit, and a prison of every unclean and hateful bird.

In Babylon the co-- inhabitants of the pleasure and power seekers are demons and filth and unclean spirits and darkness and nightmares and fear. Babylon is not unlike our modern cities that boast of their great financial districts, their beautiful theatres, etc., but at night they are dark and fearful; they are wretched, filthy, and degraded. One night my wife Leslie and I went to a theatre production in San Francisco. It was a beautiful evening, the play was terrific, and we had a great time. I forgot where I parked the car, however, and we ended up walking two blocks of Turk Street late at night. It was a stomach- wrenching experience. Dozens of pimps, whores and gaudily attired, wretched people were walking the streets, living an ugly life in that beautiful city. If you are going to live in Babylon, your fellow citizens will be demons and darkness and nightmares and all the things that go with them. They are part of the package.

Verse 4:

And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, "Come out of her, my people, that you may not participate in her sins and that you may not receive of her plagues; for her sins have piled up as high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she had mixed, mix twice as much for her. To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, 'I sit as a queen and I am not a widow, and will never see mourning.' For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong. "

Another truth the harlot fails to make clear in her offer is that there is a very effective criminal justice system at work in the universe. God remembers, his judgments are strong, and there is a punishment, a torment, for every high-handed act of rebellion; it carries with it a corresponding judgment from God. If you want what the harlot has to offer, you need to know that too.

What is the end of it all? Look at verse 9:

"And the kings of the earth, who committed acts of immorality and lived sensuously with her, will weep and lament over her when they see the smoke of her burning, standing at a distance because of the fear of her torment, saying, 'Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the stony city! For in one hour your judgment has come.' And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes any more; cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every kind of citron wood and every article of ivory and every article made from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble, and cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense and wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep, and cargoes of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives."

This is the third recognition we ought to face. The destiny of all the things that temptation places value on is that they will be rendered valueless, done away with, forgotten, rejected, they will amount to nothing. It struck me that what will happen to these merchants and kings is rather like what is happening to the refugees in Southeast Asia today. By that I do not mean that the refugees are in their plight because there is anything particularly wicked about them. But they have to stand offshore in boats watching everything they ever valued, every piece of furniture, their homes, their farms, every degree they have earned in universities, their jobs, their family heirlooms, disappear. All these things are utterly worthless to them now. They are experiencing the loss of everything they cared for and appreciated in their lives. Now this will be the experience of those who are citizens of Babylon also. As I read verses 12 and 13, it occurred to me that the list of things is so long, 29 articles, and so detailed, that it represents a kind of lament. We can picture each of these merchants standing offshore, having in the past fondled their piece of ivory handiwork, for instance, or their wine cellar or something, and we can sense their loss. It struck me too that many of the articles that make up this list sound like what are advertised in Playboy or Playgirl magazines. These very things, perfume, spices, gold, silver, and all the material attractions that sell those magazines, are exactly the sort of things that these people loved and saw taken away.

There is a fourth thing that John displays as he tears apart the illusion, as he makes us see what is really happening, and that is in verse 21:

And a strong angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "Thus will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will not be found any longer. And the sound of harpists and musicians and flute-players and trumpeters will not be heard in you any longer; and no craftsman of any craft will be found in you any longer; and the sound of a mill will not be heard in you any longer; and the light of a lamp will not shine in you any longer; and the voice of the bridegroom and bride will not be heard in you any longer; for your merchants were the great men of the earth, because all the nations were deceived by your sorcery. And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slain on the earth."

The destiny of the whole fabric of enticement that makes us think sin is valuable to us is that it will be discarded like an envelope that you crumple up and throw in the wastebasket. Or, as John saw it, its destiny will be like that of a stone that is tossed in the ocean and sinks beneath the waves; the ripples fade away and soon you never know that it ever existed. It is that worthless, it is that valueless from the point of view of eternity.

In chapter 18 John lists four things that will correct all the lies that the harlot uses in her enticement. First, he reminds us that demons and darkness and filth and terror exist in Babylon. He reminds us that God is a strong judge who remembers everything and he will mete out torment equal to the rebellion, equal to the sin. Then John reminds us that all the things we wanted and loved and appreciated and held on to will ultimately be worthless some day. Fourth, he reminds us that Babylon's final destiny is that it will be discarded, thrown away.

I mentioned earlier that this is really a tale of two cities. The last chapters of Revelation are not only a description of what will happen to the process of temptation in the world. They end with a positive answer. John is not merely going to tell us what to avoid, he is going to tell us what to embrace. Turn to chapter 21, where we will see the second city, and this city is also a woman. Babylon was a whore; New Jerusalem is a bride. Verse 1:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them,

The first thing that John exposed about Babylon is that she is the dwelling place of demons. But new Jerusalem is the dwelling place of God; he lives there; he is your fellow worker. Verse 4:

and He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true." And He said to me, "It is done, I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. "

The second thing he exposed about Babylon was that God some day would stand opposed to her as judge. In New Jerusalem God is the source of the water of life for us. Rather than judge he is the One who gives to anyone who is thirsty everything he needs for enjoyment and delight.

Verse 7:

"He who overcomes shall inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I shall show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels; and names were written on them, which are those of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. There were three gates on the east and three gates on the north and three gates on the south and three gates on the west. And the wall of the city had twelve foundation stones, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And the one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall. And the city is laid out as a square,

and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. And he measure its wall, seventy-two yards, according to human measurements, which are also angelic measurements. And the material of the wail was jasper; and the cite was pore gold, like clear glass. The foundation stones of the cite wall were adorned with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation stone was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, chalcedony; the fourth, emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite the eighth, beryl; the ninth, topaz; the tenth, chrysoprase; the eleventh, jacinth; the twelfth, amethyst. And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pore gold, like transparent glass. And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. And the cite has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp Is the Lamb. And the nations shall walk by its light, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it. And in the daytime (for there shall be no night there) its gates shall never be closed; and they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; and nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

In this description of New Jerusalem's size, glory, and richness we see a direct contrast to the refugee experience of the kings and merchants of the earth who stood offshore and watched everything they had ever valued become valueless. New Jerusalem is valuable beyond calculation, it absolutely beggars the imagination to try and calculate the value of this city.

Chapter 22 verse 1:

And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nation. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever.

Babylon will be discarded as a stone thrown into the ocean but the final destiny of those who live in New Jerusalem is to reign forever and ever to be valuable and glorious for eternity.

We saw that the problem about the harlot and about the whole system of lies that says to us that sin has advantages for us is that it is a con, but it is an extremely effective one. It is very subtle very beautiful very powerful. Sometimes we are completely overcome by a sense of the "rightness" of the lies. Furthermore the description of the church that we see in chapters 21 and 22 is exactly the opposite of what the church looks like now. We are deceived when we only see the church on earth: weak, immature and ridiculous, often ugly, frequently faithless. The whore is beautiful; the bride is ugly.

Every generation of Christians has lived with the hope that in their generation, perhaps, the Lord would come back, that truth would be established beyond the ability of any deceiver to cloud it. But we can live daily on the basis of the truth, because we know some day, perhaps very soon, all these things that we have read in scripture will take place.

I would like to finish by reading C. S. Lewis' version of Revelation 21 and 22, the last paragraph of the "Chronicles of Narnia." That series of stories was Lewis' imagination of a world created by God held in the grip of Satan, but released when Christ in the figure of a Lion, died for his people and came back again to reign. This is his description of the things we see in Revelation. That ought to be our hope so that we can live on the basis of our hope, right now.

"The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write

them. For us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page. Now at last they were beginning Chapter I of the great story which no one on earth has read which goes on forever and ever and in which every chapter is better than the one before.

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