

Week 10

A series in REVELATION

17 August Monday

Read Revelation 17:1 - 8

This is one of the more shocking pictures amongst a fair amount of shocking stuff! But the image John paints has a long and well-trodden history in the 1st century and in the Old Testament. In the 1st century, cult prostitution was a prominent part of the religious and economic structure of pagan religion, particularly Greco-Roman religion. Furthermore, in the Old Testament, because Israel's relationship with God was spoken of in marital terms, idolatry or going after other gods was spoken of in terms of adultery or prostitution. This is a good reminder that, whilst being for us, this text was not written to us; those to whom it was written, were very familiar with this stuff.

The 'woman', the text says, is 'Babylon'. Now Babylon was infamous as the archetype – the 'mother' – of all and every evil power that established itself against God, his people and his purposes. It had played that role at a particular moment in Israel's history but its dark reach didn't stop there; instead, it was Babylon's DNA coursing through cycles of oppressive powers, right through to Rome (which is likely in view here given it famously has 7 hills, like those the woman sits on, as explained in Rev 17:9). As one writer says, 'Babylon is found wherever there is Satanic deception... it is defined more by dominant idolatries than temporal or geographic boundaries...' We noticed the presence of parodies in a previous chapter, and we are back there again: the woman here – a terrible parody of the women seen earlier in chapter 12, who gives birth to the good purposes of God.

Various attempts have been made to map specific emperors, or empires, or world leaders on to the heads and horns – better perhaps not to build too much on those uncertain foundations. The woman, it says, is 'drunk with the

blood' of the saints – the phrase being a well-known idiom for a lust for violence. For those in the churches within the Roman world, the meaning was not lost. Many had been killed by Rome. The emperor Nero grimly and famously used Christian as lamps in the dark, by setting fire to them. Underneath all of this, we see that old beast again, doing the dragon's bidding. The true energy underneath such things is spiritual and dark. It's a horrible image, but it unmasks something of the seductive dark underbelly of oppressive systems of power. The snake in the garden promised Eve much and gave her death – seduction and deceit have been the dragon's way from the beginning. It's like John is saying, 'Don't be deceived by its promise of power – its evil, evil, evil.' Jesus in the desert had his own encounter with that dragon, who offered him 'all the kingdoms of the world'. But Jesus resisted. The church must resist too: staying faithful to Jesus, living his way, choosing his kingdom, where life is found in laying it down, where the greatest is the servant of all, and sacrificial love is the only currency.

Can you recognise the snake's deceptive whispering voice in the world around you? The seductive pull towards any numbers of things? When Jesus confronted it in the desert, each time he responded with scripture, 'It is written...' He also taught us pray, 'lead us not into temptation...' **Perhaps choose one verse to memorise today, so that it is in you to wield and, perhaps, pray as Jesus taught us to.**

18 August Tuesday

Read Revelation 17:9 - 18

As with much in Revelation, there is a wide divergence of views over this passage. Some take a historical view, that this is talking mainly about internal political jostling for power in Rome; others a more future oriented 'end times' view that this is all about political turmoil to come. Others see cycles and repetition through the ages, motifs and DNA. Still others see symbolism in the numbers, noting that 7 and 10 are both symbolically significant in this genre as pointing to completeness and 'multiplicity', respectively; encouraging us that this is how to engage this text – more theological than political. For many it is a combination of many of the above and more.

It's not always easy to tease out the specific as we know. But on a practical level, it's hard not to notice how much suffering the world has seen in the wake of the pursuit and grasping of power. Again and again, it just appears too seductive for the world to avoid for long, with the inevitability of suffering a foregone conclusion. It is the weak, the poor, the vulnerable who are very often the collateral damage. This is more than the result of thin, 2D decision making; instead, it's very much an expression of the thick reality, in which the spiritual plays a key part. The whole New Testament speaks to this.

From whatever angle this whole picture is viewed, the chaotic and dark whispers of spiritual evil, and their concrete expression in the broken world around us, will eventually exhaust themselves. The image of the beast destroying the woman, one author writes is, 'John's most vivid symbol for the self-destroying power of evil'. We read that, 'God has put it into their hearts', suggesting that part of God's judgment on evil is its self-destructive nature: hurt leads to hurt, violence begets violence – the logic of evil becomes its own judgement. All of this, though, is overcome by Jesus – the lamb – and those

who faithfully live (and even die) like him. The logic of his kingdom is of an entirely different nature.

A warning and encouragement to those facing Rome's power: don't be seduced by it – it gives only death.

A warning and encouragement through the ages: don't let the DNA of Babylon sway you, don't listen to the dragon's whisper, or the snake's deception.

A warning and encouragement to us, too: many voices promise life but only Jesus offers it. Don't be deceived; don't give up.

In the Gospels, Jesus said to his disciples: 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...' **This is the logic of the Kingdom; lets pray that today we would find ways to sow it everywhere we go.**

19 August Wednesday

Revelation 18:1 - 8

his chapter is a continuation of the last chapter. The image of the prostitute, of Babylon, of Rome, of the beastly dark powers are all merged and layered. This chapter continues the judgement of all that. One author writes, '[John] describes God's judgement on the great satanic system of evil that has corrupted the earth's history.' Again, whilst some speak more specifically and pointedly with regards to their identification of John's particular target, it seems hard to argue conclusively. Best, perhaps, to notice the clearer point: that the image of chapter 17, Babylon 'the great', the archetype of seductive, godless, oppressive power, is fallen. The city has become a wasteland and the focus of lament. Her boasts and power and self-sufficiency have come to nothing.

The language is vivid and rich with Old Testament imagery and accounts of the fall of cities that had become synonymous, almost household names, for wicked places. Passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah stand behind it. There is a call to God's people to come out of her, again reminiscent perhaps of the warning to some of the churches in chapters 2 and 3, to avoid entanglements that compromise their 'Jesus-yness'. To return to faithful living. Perhaps there is the suggestion, too, of the ongoing offer, of the ever out-stretched hand of mercy, to those who will take it.

Ultimately, we see God's judgement and final 'no' to the evil expressions of the beast and dragon. Interestingly, the judgement is spoken of in terms that remind us of its self-seeding nature; Babylon is to drink "a portion from her own cup". For N.T. Wright, it's a drinking of its own medicine. God, it seems, 'turns wickedness back on itself'. The churches first reading this would have been

encouraged and chastened; encouraged to see that no matter how strong, proud or 'successful' Rome appeared, God would win out; chastened towards maintaining their distinctive faithfulness to Jesus and resisting the seductive power of all that was around them.

We might be the same. Encouraged because God will ultimately deal with the darkness in our world. Chastened towards faithfulness and a greater attentiveness to places where we are most tempted to compromise. **Perhaps you could pray, as David does in Psalm 139, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."**

20 August Thursday

Read Revelation 18:9 - 24

The destruction of 'Babylon' is continued in the poetic fashion we saw yesterday. Here, those who have benefited from 'Babylon' are seen to mourn for the 'city', whose dragonish DNA – carried through numerous and various concrete expressions – is finally brought to an end. In verse 13, we read a list of cargo that ships had brought to her, including 'humans sold as slaves'. Once again, Revelation is employing the language of the Exodus where God is the God who freed his people from slavery; he is the God who sets enslaved people free. Again and again. The abuse of power and the thread of wickedness running through 'Babylon', and every system she represents and animates, will not be tolerated in God's Kingdom – where people are made in his image with dignity and must never be treated as anything other.

Verse 20 shows the end of such things – the destruction of that which destroys – the removal of the cancerous ailment. And it is something to be celebrated, particularly by those who have felt the sharp teeth of it; those martyred at the hands of Rome and beyond would have certainly been in view. Like we have said, we tend to think of judgement as solely negative, but that's not how it is portrayed in the Bible; it is a putting right of all that is wrong. The final image is of a heavy millstone thrown into the sea and sinking, an image that Jeremiah used of Babylon and that Jesus used speaking of the gravity of sin. The millstone adds yet another layer to the rich and descriptive imagery used of the devil's handiwork. It plummets to the bottom of the sea.

In this collision of kingdoms, there is only one outcome. However much it looks like the way of power and whispered promises of the dragon lead to success, they will ultimately fail because God's commitment to his people, to his world, will not be frustrated. Whilst Caesar may claim to be a god, in truth there is only one God – and his Kingdom is an everlasting one. Deeply encouraging for anyone struggling to keep faith when they feel outnumbered and overshadowed in a world that builds 'success' out of dark things – a world that can very often seem to be winning. I wonder whether you ever feel that? Be encouraged, God is at work. It reminds me of where, in the Narnia stories, even whilst winter holds they are warmed by the news, 'Aslan is on the move.' May we be warmed by such news.

21 August Friday

Read Isaiah 47

Take some time to notice the Old Testament backdrop to images and phrases that John uses in the book of Revelation. For those to whom it was originally written, these things would have been immediately clear; the images would have functioned like hyperlinks opening a whole world of meaning. It reminds us, like John Bodily mentioned in talk 1, of the important principle: whilst this book is for us, it was not originally written to us. **As you read today, notice the internal links and referencing within the Bible itself.**