

REVEALED Part Thirteen: *Revelation 17:1-20:15*

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West Valley Church
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**Revealed:
Uncovering the Mystery of Revelation
Part Thirteen: Revelation 17-20¹**

One of my many fond memories of college was a time in the spring when, for our class, our professor decided it was just too good outside to be stuck inside, so our class went out on the lawn for that day. I remember where we were on the campus lawn, I remember how good the breeze felt, how warm the sun was on my shoulders, I even remember the direction I was facing. It was so nice and so different to be outside. But I don't remember a thing about the class itself. I can't remember anything about the content of the information.

I tell you that story to say that I recognize the risk we face having this service outside. You will likely remember that we were outside, but you may not remember much about the message! And I don't blame you – there are many wonderful distractions all around us. But that is also very unfortunate, because when we scheduled this day, it ended up happening to fall on the largest chunk of Revelation – four chapters – and one of the most controversial. So I'm left with the challenge of trying to make the largest, most difficult passage as brief as possible. I've committed to doing that for you as I speak, so will you commit to being as focused as you can as you listen and engage?

I am hoping you read these chapters in advance, because that is one of the ways I'm going to save us time is by not re-reading them. I'm also going to encourage you to dig deeper on your own to compensate for what we just don't have time to talk about. You can download the manuscript from our website, which has Scripture references embedded in it, and you will see an article that I posted on there as well that will give you some really worthwhile things to consider. But for today, I'm going to have to give you what you might call a "thirty thousand foot fly over" – a view from way above – and we'll need to skip some of the details. And that's unfortunate because there are a lot of details. So please fasten your seat belts, put your tray tables up and locked, and bring your seat to its full and upright position, because we are taking off! Hopefully we'll avoid any turbulence...

We are going to begin by seeing that these chapters start with a view of the...

¹ Sources: Carol Rotz, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (2012, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, MO); Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (2006, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis); Scott Daniels, *Marked by the Lamb: Paznaz Study on Revelation* (<http://drtscott.typepad.com/markedbythelamb/>); Michael O'Neill, *Revelation 19:1-8*, Biblical Theology BIBL7560, Northwest Nazarene University, June 3, 2014; George Lyons, *Revelation 20:1-10*, Northwest Nazarene University Chapel, January 12, 2000; John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

1. Judgment of “*Babylon*”

John gives us a metaphorical picture of Babylon. If you haven't been with us for the other messages in this series, I'll tell you now: for John and his first century readers, Babylon of the Old Testament is Rome of Revelation. Remember that, because if Babylon is representational, it can represent something else for us today. The metaphor that John uses is that Babylon is a harlot or a prostitute. Your translation of the Bible might use a more harsh word, but you get the picture. And the woman is riding on a beast. And the beast has seven heads and ten horns. And the woman's all dressed up and her clothes have writing all over them with blasphemous names. She's got loads of expensive jewelry; she's slurping from a golden cup.

Okay, that all makes sense, so let's move on...just kidding! Thankfully, the angel explains things to John a little bit later.

Babylon is a city – in this case, Rome. To characterize a city as a woman – especially a prostitute – was a familiar metaphor from Old Testament writing (*For example: Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 57:7-13; 1;21; Jeremiah 3:2; Ezekiel 16, 23; Exodus 34:16; Leviticus 17:7, 20:5; Numbers 14:33; Deut. 31:16; Judges 2:17, 8:27; 2 Kings 9:22; 1 Chronicles 5:15; 2 Chronicles 21:11, 13*)². That wasn't an anti-feminine statement, but it used the image of an unfaithful wife or a loose woman as an example of a community or city who was unfaithful to God. The idea of the city being a prostitute makes sense actually – regardless of whether it is a male or female. Prostitution is the selling off of one's self – one's identity – for material gain. Right? So these cities or communities traded their value in Christ for selfish gain – political power and wealth. So Babylon in this passage could mean any city or cities in any age or time that the church reads this passage. Anytime there is a city or a nation that lures people into materialism, selfishness, greed, sexual immorality, and sensual pleasure – especially at the expense of the poor and outcast and homeless – that city or nation is Babylon. Eventually, that city or nation will turn against those who act on God's Love and represent his selfless service and Truth, because they don't want to be reminded of how godless and sinful they are. The very presence of loving, serving, grace-filled people becomes a source of guilt for them, so they try to eradicate it by killing the Christians.

What about the beast? We've already been introduced to the beast during Pastor Casey's preaching, so go back and reread those sermons. The seven heads on the beast are the seven hills that Rome was famously built upon. The ten crowns are different kings, whether living, dead, or even rumored to come back from the dead, like Nero was, but who all come to the prostitute for her “favors.”

Her expensive clothes and jewelry represented her wealth and opulence and luxury, even while her people suffered in poverty. The cup she is getting drunk on is the blood of Christians that she has tortured and killed.

² Carol Rotz points out that the image of a city or community being an unfaithful wife or prostitute is used in the prophetic books of the OT, the Pentateuch, and the history books, as well as throughout Revelation.

And what ends up happening to her is that the beast and the kings of the earth turn on her and actually become the ones who destroy her. There came a time when all those other kings or nations resented her wealth and power, and became disillusioned with her promises, and so they turned on her. The result of her destruction is complete, and it turns out that these godless kings and nations are the very ones that God uses to bring out his punishment against Babylon.

Got it? The destruction doesn't take long – John says it lasts “an hour.” John doesn't mean an actual 60 minutes – as with every other instance of numbers of people or time in Revelation – it is symbolic. “An hour” is symbolic of a very short time.

There are three groups of people: kings, merchants, and seafarers who all do business with Babylon, who stand back and watch Babylon's destruction. They stand a long ways away in order to avoid getting pulled into her destruction – and they sing songs that mourn how complete her destruction is. These sinful people mourn the loss of their trade inventory – everything from money to jewels to people (that's right – people were merely property to them; they even mourned the loss of slaves.). Their grief is not so much sadness for Babylon's destruction as it is sadness over having lost the pleasures and wealth that came from being in bed with her, if you know what I mean. They didn't care about Babylon; they cared about what they lost in her destruction.

The previous church we pastored was in a small town, which often meant that I would be asked to perform funerals for people in the community who had no church of their own. I always make it a practice, whenever possible, to meet with key family members in order to get their perspective of the deceased, which helps me plan the funeral service. So there were times that it resulted in my working in family situations that were less than ideal. One time I met with a family to plan the service for a woman who was the matriarch of the family; she was quite old but she controlled the family while acquiring a great deal of wealth. Most of the meeting with her family went back and forth between their opportunities to vent their disgust for her and positioning themselves for whatever of her wealth might be left for them to get their hands on. I wasn't sure that they were grieving her passing as much as grieving the loss of their opportunities to benefit from her wealth. They hated her but maintained a phony relationship with her in order to hopefully get some of her money. That's exactly what was going on with the people of the world in Revelation who are mourning the passing of Babylon the great prostitute. Once they knew they weren't going to get anything more from her, they turned on her and didn't hide their hatred anymore.

John's description of Babylon and her relationship with these kings and merchants is a weaving together of several dimensions: sexual, economic, political, social, spiritual, and cult-like patriotism. John's description is one of idol-worship – of people being drawn into idol worship of Babylon through her sexual immorality, wealth, and power.

Can you think of any parallels today? Can you think of a nation who is incredibly wealthy but corrupt? Whose wealth is built on the backs of its own poor and the

poor of other countries? Can you think of a nation who exports sexual immorality, say through movies or the internet? Can you think of a nation that other nations do business with, but are beginning to turn against it? Can you think of a nation whose leaders are consumed with power and wealth, which treat its people as mere pawns for votes for power, or worse yet treats children and women as slaves for human trafficking?

Any nation who exploits people, who thirsts for power and wealth and who rejects God, is a Babylon. There have been many, many Babylons down through the ages, and I'm afraid we live in one right now. I like what Scott Daniels, one of our theologians and a pastor said: "America is another Babylon. Now, don't get me wrong – it's my *favorite* Babylon! Of all the Babylons, America is my favorite! But it is still a Babylon." If that's true (and I believe it is becoming more true every day!), what should we do about it? I'll talk about that in a few minutes.

After the great prostitute Babylon is completely destroyed, there is a scene shift from earth to heaven, and we read about an amazing...

2. Hallelujah Chorus

We get a glimpse of the amazing worship service around the throne, with angels and Christians alike singing great songs of praise. I think it's important to say that they are not singing praises because people have been killed and destroyed in Babylon's destruction. Think of it this way: when Nazi Germany was finally overthrown, no right thinking person rejoiced over how many people were killed to finally stop Hitler. Certainly no Christian should ever have been happy to see the loss of human life. It didn't matter if those lives were Jews, Germans, Americans, Italians, Russians – on and on. No one celebrated the loss of 60 million lives no matter what country those lives lived in. But every right thinking person – Christian included – celebrated the destruction of an evil system of government, right? Well, that's what they are celebrating in Heaven in chapter 19 – that God has brought about salvation for people by putting an end to an evil, idolatrous, perverse, destructive, nation. For the first century readers, Babylon was Rome. And ever since then, Babylon has been any other evil nation.

Some nations may even start out good but end up selling their identity in exchange for money, power, and pleasure. Are you following me?

At the end of the celebration in chapter 19, we see Christ himself and the armies of heaven prepared for battle. Then the scene shifts again to the...

3. Final Defeat of God's Enemies

So now we come to one of the most popular chapters of Revelation and one that has caused the most confusion. In chapter 19 Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, whose robe is dipped in his own sacrificial blood and who is riding a great white horse, has struck down the warring kings of the earth with the sword that comes

from his mouth, which is the Word of God. Now in chapter 20 an angel appears, holding a key to the abyss and he has a great chain. He seizes the dragon, or Satan, binds him with the chain, and throws him into the Abyss and locks it for a thousand years so that Satan does not have the same seductive power over nations that he used to have. But, we're told, he is going to be set free for a short time after the thousand years. Then those who were killed for their faith in Christ – John says those who were beheaded, but it can mean anyone killed for their faith – they are raised to life and reign with Christ for that thousand years. The rest of the dead don't come to life until the end of the thousand years.

Then the thousand years are up, and Satan is released and given power to go out and deceive the nations *again*. He's learned nothing from his incarceration. Satan gathers an army that John calls "Gog" and "Magog" who march against God's people. God himself dramatically protects them and condemns Satan and the beast and the false prophet to Hell forever. Then we skip to the judgment scene, where people are judged whether they have taken the mark of the beast – which means they have taken on Satan's character and nature – *or* they have taken the mark of the Lamb. Only two groups. Then names are read from two books: one is the book of life, the other is a recording of what people have done; in other words, you could call it a book of works. Everyone is judged by the book of works, but those who are also in the book of life are spared. They stay in heaven. Those who are not in the Lamb's book of life are sent to their eternal punishment in hell, along with Death, and there they will be tormented by Satan and death forever and ever. Those in the book of life live forever, and we will see what that's about next Sunday.

First of all, let me strongly encourage you to check something out: we have posted on the sermons page a manuscript of a sermon that one of my professors and a leading theologian, Dr. George Lyons preached back in 2000, after everyone had survived the end of the world with the Y2K scare. This is one of the most succinct and yet thorough treatments of chapter 20 that you will ever read. Please: go to the website and download it and read it. It will give you a great deal to think about and if you want to, we can talk about it some more. What I'm going to share briefly is taken from Dr. Lyon's writing and from Dr. Scott Daniels.

Okay, very quickly: if you want to hold to some kind of teaching about a rapture that happens before Christ returns, you are going to have to reject chapter 20, because clearly it shows that believers are still on earth. (Actually, you have to reject pretty much all of Scripture if you want to believe in a secret rapture event.)

What's the business about tying up Satan for a thousand years? The thousand years – what is referred to as the "millennium" – has been debated for centuries. There are four major interpretations of the millennium: one is called "Historic Premillennialism." Those who hold to this view believe that Christ will come again to establish an earthly kingdom of a literal 1000 years, *before* the eternal order begins. Then there is "Postmillennialism" which believes that the Church will succeed in establishing the lordship of Christ on earth before Jesus returns to inaugurate the eternal order. Then there is what's called "Amillennialism" – the idea that Christ's first coming began a spiritual kingdom over which he will reign until his Second

Coming brings in the uncontested, eternal Kingdom of God. Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism. Both Post and Amillennialists believe the number 1,000 is figurative, not literal.

These three perspectives have been around since John wrote Revelation.³

In the Church of the Nazarene, we don't commit to any one of those three; we just don't think it is that critical. You can decide which of those three you want to hold to. But here's what we believe is most important: Jesus will return again! And when he does, the saints who are dead will rise first and then those who are alive will be caught up in the air to meet him. He will judge the living and the dead, and people will face their eternal destiny depending on whether they've believed him, and then what they've done about it.

But in the last 150 years or so, there is another viewpoint that is called "Dispensationalism." This is a viewpoint that takes Revelation's symbols literally, believes that Revelation pinpoints specific nations and world events in our day, and that there is a secret rapture that takes place before Christ ever returns. I really, really encourage you to read that article that we've posted. I will also say this: we in the Church of the Nazarene do not lean very well toward extreme dispensationalism; it's mostly sensationalism.

Let me just say this (start listening now if you haven't yet!): John's purpose in writing Revelation is *theological* more than it is *historical*. John knows that Satan is real and that Satan is the source and power of evil in this world. John is not saying that Satan has the body of a dragon, or that a physical chain can be used to bind him. John does not want us to speculate on where the abyss is. We should not use John's powerful spiritual images to represent physical or temporal realities.

John uses time frames and physical images to *represent* spiritual realities. When John said that the destruction of Babylon will take "an hour" he didn't mean 60 minutes. He meant a short time. Up to this point in Revelation, John has never used numbers to represent specific times or actual counts of people. Why would he start doing that now? You can't find the millennium on a calendar. You can't find the Abyss on a map. You won't reach heaven by climbing in a rocket to space and you won't reach the abyss by digging a hole. John's reference to time is to point us to a reality that is *beyond* time!⁴ A thousand years is ten cubed – which means a full and complete amount of time. So John's millennium means that Satan's powers are limited for a time that God has determined. Then Satan is allowed to be unleashed, and he gathers people from all over the world – which is what the nations of "Gog and Magog" symbolize, as they did for Ezekiel (38-39, see also 1 Chronicles 1:5, 5:4; Genesis 10:2). And these newly deceived people try to wipe Christians off the map, but God finishes it all. You'll want to go to our website and download this manuscript, and Dr. Lyons' manuscript, and read them.

³ Lyons

⁴ Daniels

So let me wrap this up: what difference does it make for you today? Well, if you are not a Christian, you are in luck! Actually you are in Grace, because God has allowed you a sneak peek into the future – the good and the bad. He’s shown you how to avoid the bad and be a part of the good. But let me tell you as emphatically as I can: Christ WILL come again. You need to prepare yourself for that. You need to accept who Jesus is, or at least start seriously exploring who he is.

Whether you are not a Christian, or you are, there is a warning here. It is in 18:4 – “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.”

God is warning us today about the Babylon we live in. He’s not saying we should leave the United States for Canada or something. Remember, Jesus prayed in John 17:15 that we wouldn’t be taken out of the world, but that we would be his presence IN this world. So what *are* we to do? The same thing Jesus has been saying all throughout Revelation: don’t be seduced by Babylon’s idol worship. Don’t get distracted by material wealth and comfort. Stay a faithful witness in this world for Christ but stay out of Babylon’s seductive trap.

Is the US a Babylon? Yes. It IS my favorite Babylon, but it is not the Kingdom of God. It is a man-made government that is getting worse rather than better. It will never be the Kingdom of God. YOU and I are the Kingdom of God! Here’s the point: I’m not saying we should withdraw or abandon our country. We should be very involved in trying to preserve what is right and what is true in our country. We should fight for those who are oppressed by the systems we have and for those who can’t fight for themselves. We should love everyone and not judge anyone, and do all we can to offer a loving hand out and hand up to anyone that we can. We must tell people how much God loves them through Christ. But we must be very careful not to be lulled to spiritual sleep by Babylon, nor should we have a sleepover with Babylon, if you know what I mean. Does this make sense? If you have questions, email them to us please so we can answer them in two weeks.

On that wonderful note, let’s pray and eat food!