

# 14. The spirit of the age

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[ 0 : 00 ] Now as we turn to the Word of God, let's have a moment's prayer. And Father, indeed we pray that the gracious Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the prophets, the Spirit who spoke in times past will speak to us now.

We'll take these words from your Word, once spoken to John the Apostle, but spoken to all of us who live in the last days, that you will throw a flood of light on the sacred page, that you will open our hearts and minds to your Word, that you will open your Word to our hearts and our minds. We pray for this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. So we're on page 1037 and Revelation 17.

Probably many of you have visited the city of Rome and perhaps explored the Vatican Museum, that magnificent building with its long, sprawling corridors, with its huge rooms and its many, many treasures, many, many, many, many priceless paintings and other works of art.

If you've been there or if you're intending to go, let me point out to you there is one problem. None of these works of art are labelled room after room of tremendous artefacts, tremendous artistic treasures, without any guide as to what they are.

[ 1 : 37 ] In other words, what you need as you go round this great museum is a guide, and preferably a reliable guide. Now, I've often compared the Book of Revelation to a great art gallery.

As we wander through this inspired art gallery and see picture after picture, work of art after work of art, in room after room, we need a guide.

And we need an authoritative guide. As John goes, as it were, into this next room, he has indeed an authoritative guide. The angel interpreter who comes to him and says, come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute which is seated on many waters.

You see, the point is, and this is an important point in interpreting this book, and indeed in interpreting Scripture, the picture is not itself the revelation of what God is saying.

It is the picture and the commentary, the divine commentary, that is the revelation. Because we misunderstand the picture. We could find it confusing and baffling and perplexing.

[ 2 : 43 ] But, that's why the angel is interpreting to John and to us what this latest picture means, the judgment of the great prostitute.

Now, let me just say a quick word about the place in the book. The Book of Revelation comes to the Apostle John on the island of Petmos. And there's a three, we've already seen three divisions in the book.

Or this is the third one. First of all, the risen Lord in the middle of the seven churches to whom the whole book is written. The risen Lord who has the keys of death and who is the Lord of history, who will unfold the future as well as he has controlled the past and controls the present.

Then in chapters 4 to 16, that long middle section of the book, the Lamb who is in the midst of the churches, the Lamb who died, unfolds the scroll, the scroll of history, pours out judgments on the earth, threefold judgments, the seals, the trumpets, and the chapter we've just seen, the bowls.

But in between, there are interludes about the security of God's people. Not that God's people will be saved from persecution, from trouble, even from death, but they are eternally safe.

[ 4 : 02 ] They are sealed. They are already, as good as it were, standing before the throne of God and of the Lamb. Now we move into a third section, which is indicated by the phrase in verse 3, in the Spirit.

I've taken that fourfold repetition of that word, in the Spirit, to be the key to unlocking the structure of the book. I was, he carried me in the Spirit.

In other words, this is direct revelation from the Holy Spirit through the angel interpreter, and therefore it's valid for every generation. And what is this great prostitute seated on the waters?

Now John, if he wrote his first letter before he wrote this book of Revelation, we don't know exactly the dates, has already talked about Babylon.

He's not called it Babylon. He has called it the world. He said, do not love the world, for all that is in the world, the pleasure of the eyes, the pleasure of the flesh, is not of the Father, but of the world.

[ 5 : 10 ] So this is the innermost nature of evil being revealed. Now chapter 16 brought us up to the verge of the final judgment, with the last of the bulls poured out on earth.

As if before that, John is standing back and saying, look, there's more we need to see. You need to see what's actually been happening throughout history. That's why I'm calling this sermon The Spirit of the Age.

This book is, this chapter is about the spirit of the age, the world. We'll look a bit more at that next week in chapter 18, because these two chapters deal with the Babylon, its downfall, and then continuing in chapter 19 and 20 with the coming of Christ and the final judgment.

As I suggested, the chapter really falls into two parts. First of all, there is the vision which exposes reality in verses 1 to 6.

The vision which exposes reality. And secondly, in verses 7 to 18, the interpretation which gives strength to persevere.

[ 6 : 18 ] So we have the vision and we have the interpretation. So let's look at both of these then. the vision, the picture which exposes reality. Now this picture is powerful, it's overwhelming.

Indeed, John himself says, I marvel greatly, verse 6. And it's meant to be. Evil flourishes, not because it looks ugly, but because it looks glamorous.

So what is John being told here? First of all, he's being told the origin of the spirit of the world. On her name, verse 5, was written a name of mystery, Babylon the Great, mother of prostitutes and of earth abominations.

Now we first read about Babylon in Genesis 10, in the panorama of early civilizations, founded by Nimrod, the demonic and sinister warlord.

How sorry I am that that guy was called Nimrod. Because Nimrod is my very, very favourite piece of music. That's what the man was called, the demonic and sinister warlord whose kingdom exemplified the world, the anti-God, hostile, violent spirit that is against God and against his Christ.

[ 7 : 38 ] And in the next chapter, of course, we have it, we have the expression of that in the Tower of Babel, the Tower whose top reaches to heaven, Tower which glorifies humanity and tries to dethrone God.

And of course, throughout the rest of the Old Testament, Babylon becomes the place of exile. By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept while we remembered Zion.

And it stands here, obviously, for the city of Rome, but we mustn't confine it to that. It stands for all anti-God empires then and now, throughout history.

Interesting in 1 Peter, Peter writes in 1 Peter 5 verse 13, She who is at Babylon sends you greetings. Now the she there is not an individual, I believe, but the whole church of God.

In other words, right in the heart of Satan's empire, right in the heart of the world, which is hostile to God, is a testimony to the eternal God and to his people.

[ 8 : 40 ] She who is at Babylon. So its origin are way back in Genesis 10. Of course its origin is earlier than that, is it not? The origin goes back to Genesis chapter 3.

This is the work of the serpent, who is behind all that the world stands for and all that the world is. And this is represented by, and look at the beasts with seven heads, verse 3, and ten horns.

Now the seven heads means it's aspiring to be God. And the ten means, almost sense of the endlessness of the beast, over again, over again, every generation.

Will this beast never be conquered? Are we never going to get rid of the beast? So its origin, Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.

And why is this a name of mystery? I mean, you may say it's not a name of mystery. The angel tells us what it is. But the point is, as we'll see, this is mysterious to the whole world.

[ 9 : 46 ] The world who are not listening to the revelation of God, the world whose eyes are blind to the gospel, don't see Babylon as it is. Because the second thing about it is seductiveness.

Great prostitute. The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality, and so on. The dwellers on earth, we are told, have become drunk. Verse 2. Now, this woman here, who is also a city, is being built up as a deliberate contrast to the other city we're going to meet in the later chapters, Zion, city of our God, who is also the bride of the Lamb.

What's being built up here, and we'll see it even more in the next chapter, is the seductiveness and glamour of the world. The economic glamour we'll see in the next chapter.

The sheer power and influence of money. The love of money, which we all feel tempted by. Sexual temptation. The glamourising of sex.

The glamourising of money. And it's no accident it's in a city, because in the anonymity of cities, so much of this flourishes. But after all, cities are concentrations of power and of opportunity, and therefore the temptations are going to be greater.

[11:02] Luxury and ostentation. Verse 4. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, taking obviously from the emperor's court in the immediate context.

This is what John calls the pride of life, in his first letter. And people become drunk with this. This is not really talking so much about excessive alcohol, but about the spirit of human indiscipline and excess.

Once again, don't we hear the echo of another voice, a much earlier voice. You will be like gods, knowing good and evil. That was the first temptation, wasn't it?

A lifestyle with no restraint. And yet it's so seductive. Indeed, when you read this kind of passage, when you hear it preached on, people might well say, well, the spoilsport.

It's not like this at all. That's why it's called a mystery. Because it's so glamorous, it's so seductive. We're not generally deceived by evil that comes to us in all its ugliness, in all its crudity.

[12:09] We're generally deceived by evil that presents itself with glamour, with seduction. A tree that would make us wise. Once again, remember the early chapters of the Bible.

That's why I call this a vision, which exposes reality. What is this really like then? And there's one or two hints here as well. Not only do we have the seductive nature of it, the powerful nature of it, symbolised in Babylon.

Verse 3, He carried me away in the Spirit, into a wilderness. Behind this brilliant facade, behind this colourful display, is desolation and death.

It is in fact actually a wilderness. The poet T.S. Eliot called a wasteland. Because that's what we get as a result of anti-God thinking and anti-God living.

We don't actually get purple and scarlet, gold, jewel and pearls. We end up with a barren desert, a wasteland. But also the desert in Scripture is so often the place of revelation, the place where people have met with God, Moses, Jesus himself, and the temptation in the wilderness.

[13:27] So you see, the cup looks beautiful, adorned with a golden cup, but it's full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.

Inside is corruption and decay. Now as I say, the immediate imagery for John comes from the city of Rome. And this is not just a Christian writer speaking about this.

If you've used Roman writers of a similar period, Seneca, the philosopher, described Rome as a filthy sewer. That was the attitude of a wise and perceptive observer like Seneca.

Another writer, Juvenal, speaks of the Empress Messalina. She was the third wife of the Emperor Claudius. She served as a prostitute in a brothel. You see, that's how acute observers, not just Christian observers, saw this glittering but decadent city.

So what's it really like? First of all, it is decadent. It is a wasteland. It leads to nothing. It ends up like the prodigal son eating husks.

[14:34] That's what happens when we follow the spirit of the world and be deceived by the city of the world. But notice, it's also a persecutor. Verse 6, I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

Now, I don't believe the saints and the martyrs are a separate group of people. I think, because remember, the word martyr, martyrs in Greek, means a witness.

It's a salutary reminder that in ancient Rome and indeed in the Roman Empire at this time to be a witness was probably to be a martyr. And why is John astonished?

Why does he marvel greatly? I think John marvels greatly because he's seeing the triumph of the beast rather than its downfall. John is wondering, John is really saying what the Old Testament laments, Sam says, Lord, how long?

How long before you punish this wicked earth? How long before you roll back evil and bring in your kingdom? And that brings us to the interpretation which gives strength to persevere.

[15:45] We've had the vision which reveals reality, the glamour and the seduction, but behind it desolation and decay. The apparent toleration, yet behind it persecution and evil.

The interpretation then, because we need these pictures to be interpreted, it can be so easily misunderstood. Now, notice what the angel says, I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast which she writes.

The first thing to notice is that this is a parody, an imitation of the gospel. That's what the devil always does, he wants to imitate God.

And then we saw already, I think, in chapter 13, this beast parodies the lamb who died and rose again, was and is not, is about to rise from the bottomless pit.

But notice, this beast, instead of having the keys of death and of Hades, verse 8, goes to destruction. The beast that you saw was and is not and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction.

[17:00] This is not the conqueror of the world. And those who worship with him will also end up there with him. The beast that was and is not and is to come.

Surely, that's an echo of the first chapter from him who was and is and is to come. The devil has no originality. The devil only imitates.

As we said this morning, the devil is not God's opponent. As C.S. Lewis said long ago, the opponent of the devil is not God but Michael, the archangel.

We saw this in chapter 12. There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. We mustn't fall into a kind of dualism where there's two equal and opposite powers.

On earth, it sometimes does appear like that. In the heat of the battle, it appears like that. But that's simply not the case. So, first of all, it's a parody of the gospel.

[18:03] Secondly, to interpret it, verse 9, this calls for a mind with wisdom. That does not mean, as some commentators appear to think it means, this calls for a mind with boundless ingenuity which says something that no one else has ever said before.

Something original. There is no end of the interpreters of Revelation who claim to make original comments. This verse, it seems to me, is saying exactly the opposite.

This is not shrewdness it's called for. This is, what's called for here is listening to the word of God. Where do we get the wisdom from? Over and over again in this series, we've noticed, and while not in any sense pretending we understand every detail because we don't, over and over again we've noticed that some of the more obscure details become clearer when we look at the Old Testament because this book is echoing the Old Testament so substantially and so totally.

Some of those mysterious numbers are time, times and half a time. These kind of numbers going back to the book of Daniel referring there of course to the persecution of the Greeks but actually applying to the whole theories between the comings.

The four, the number of earth going back to the fourfold river of Eden. The seven, the seven days of creation and so on. That's the kind of wisdom we need to understand the book of Revelation.

[19:37] The best preparation for understanding Revelation is a thorough course in the Old Testament. I'm not exactly saying come to Cornhill but he was anear to hear, let him hear, or even she who has anear to hear.

So, in other words, this is not calling for boundless and unfettered ingenuity. This is calling for a mind trained in Scripture by the Holy Spirit.

The seven heads of seven mountains. Now, we know that Rome stood on the seven hills. This seems to me the completeness of this beast's attempts at power, its aspirations to imitate God right throughout the whole of creation.

And similar with the ten, the endless repetition and succession of the beasts. There are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, when he does, he must remain only a little while.

Now, once again, that is talking about various regimes throughout history. If you want, you can read your Roman history and find various Roman emperors who may or may not correspond to this, but I'd be to narrow it down and make it a lesson in ancient history.

[20:54] The eighth is probably the emperor Domitian immediately in whose persecuting reign this book is set. What I want you to notice, though, is this.

They are, they must remain only a little while. Verse 10, that's the first thing. Their power is limited, their power is not comprehensive.

They may have ten plus ten plus ten, but sooner or later it will come to an end. And they will, and it, they are of one mind and one authority, sorry, they are of one mind, verse 13, hand over their power

and authority to the beast.

And that power, we are told, in verse 12, lasts for one hour. Once again, not a literal statement, but telling us, then compared with eternity, these kings are short, short-lived, compared with the eternal rule of God, the one who was and is and is to come.

So, it's a parody of the gospel. The need for wisdom to see that this evil power has arisen throughout history, arises now, and will arise.

[ 22 : 06 ] And don't try, another, another reason why we shouldn't try to interpret these details too precisely, you see in verse 8, as for the beast that was and is not, it is innate.

You see, the beast is also a king, as well as, if you like, the representative of all the kings. Any given time in history, we are going to face the beast.

We must be prepared for it. But the other thing about this, in verse 14, its end is certain. They will make war on the Lamb.

That's the fatal, that's their fatal mistake, isn't it? They will make war on the Lamb. And when the opposition faces the Lamb, it's hopelessly outgunned.

That's why we sang, Worthy, O Lamb of God, adored, that every tongue should call you Lord. This is the Lamb who has all authority in heaven and on earth.

[ 23 : 08 ] The end is certain because they cannot defeat the one to whom is given the keys of death and of Hades. They cannot defeat the one who died and rose again and who has in his hands the keys of the world to come.

See why I say this is our, this is our, an interpretation to help God's people to persevere, persevere in times of persecution, persevere in times of depression, persevere in times of dullness and difficulty, persevere throughout times of apathy, persevere because the Lamb has conquered them and with him are those who are called and chosen and faithful.

Once again, not three categories of people, but the same category of people under three different, different outlines, so to speak. They are called, they are chosen and because they are called and chosen they are faithful.

They are not faithful because faith is a gift that's a quality that they have which other people don't have. They are faithful because they are called and chosen. Now that's the, that's the first reason why the end is certain but notice verse 16 and the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute.

They will make her desolate and naked devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. Human power is essentially self-destructive.

[ 24 : 45 ] Every human system that sets itself up against the Lamb sooner or later just destroys everything and everyone because as we will see next week at the end of chapter 18 in the great city is not just found the blood of the prophets and the saints but of all who have been slain on the earth.

In other words every murder, violence, warfare, all the evil bloodshed, bloodstained history of humanity lies at the door of this great prostitute and the beast whom she rides the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.

You see these kings think they are self-sufficient. They think they are in charge but actually are enslaved. The woman is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.

Isn't this the consistent message of scripture? Look at this this morning didn't we? We cannot choose but to be a servant. What we can choose is whose servant we are going to be and we can be the servant of the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth and seduced by its temptations, flattered by its adulation, terrified by its persecution but ultimately the city of God remains and the city of God will triumph.

So as John moves us into this third part of his revelation for the third time in the spirit, the angel interpreter gives him this tremendous vision, terrifying and yet seductive, beautiful and yet devilish.

[ 26 : 27 ] But the angel does not leave John and does not leave us to try and work out what it means, rather the angel tells us, and the angel tells us as we finish, don't be taken in by appearances.

This looks good, it sounds good, but in the end it will lead to judgment, it will lead to damnation, it will lead to hell. And the other thing it tells us is, it challenges us, where are our hearts?

Because after all, what has happened with this world system, with the beast, is that people are worshipping it, people are worshipping the beast, people are amazed at, how can this power arise, all this glamour, all this worshipping money, worshipping power, worshipping status.

Christ is calling us to be, as we'll sing in a moment, people of the risen King, who rejoice to give him praise. Because make no mistake, who we praise, whom we worship in our hearts, show us where our true allegiance lies, and show us whether indeed we are followers of the Lamb, or followers of the beast.

And there is no third way. Amen. Let's pray. Father, this is a solemn and searching passage.

[ 27 : 54 ] We recognise in our own hearts so much of the seduction of the prostitute and of the beast that carries her, so easily we can be flattered by the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Help us instead to give our allegiance, our hearts, our lives, our everything to the Lamb who died and rose again, the one who holds the keys of death and of Hades.

We pray that your gracious Holy Spirit will give us the strength always to do this. Amen. Amen. Amen.