

BOOK OF REVELATION

Lesson 36 - Chapters 16 and 17

We'll begin by finishing up chapter 16 and then moving on into the mind-bending Revelation chapter 17. I want to make you aware that for the next few chapters we are going to necessarily enter a greater level of detail, and thus a greater depth of explanation... slicing this onion thinner and thinner so to speak... due to the complex nature of the subjects covered. Without doing that we simply cannot accomplish what I believe we can.

As I was praying about how to present to you matters in the End Times in general, and especially beginning about this point in our study.... matters that have been interpreted in so many different ways..... each way having its own merits but also its own problems.... I got a mental vision of standing on a street corner on a foggy day barely able to make out shapes that stood just a few feet ahead of me. I knew something was there because I could also hear faint sounds. But what accompanies dense fog is its ability to muffle sound, so I couldn't be sure exactly what I was hearing. As some time passed the fog began to lift a bit, and now I could see that the shapes were people. Still, I couldn't tell male from female, what they were wearing, where they might be going, how big or little they were or practically any detail for that matter. With the passing of a little more time, the fog continues to thin and now I could see a few general features about these people. For those nearest to me, I could make out what gender a person was by what they were wearing or maybe the length of their hair; which direction they might be headed, and perhaps if they had a purse or briefcase or a bag of groceries in their hand; things that give me clues for what their roles in their various activities might be. For those people-shapes standing further away, I could tell if they were moving or stationary, but little else. To know more I'd just have to wait until the fog, on its own schedule, finally dissipated enough that I could more clearly perceive the thousand little details and visual cues that go together to create a full picture not only of where I am, but what is going on all around me and what involvement all these people might have in the scene that is playing out. I think this is how we must approach Revelation and John's visions.

So what stage of the fog clearing are we in? I'm not sure; but I know that it is not as thick as it was when John first received these divine visions. It is not as thick as it was when the Pilgrims fled Europe for the New World. And, it is also not as thick as it was before the nation of Israel was shockingly reborn, overnight, in 1948. So we can know a lot more about End Times matters than Believers in any of those past generations. But I can also tell you with full confidence that the fog remains a little thicker than what some commentators and authors suggest with their self-assured predictions of End Times timelines and events that even sometimes include names and dates. Therefore we're going to continue in the approach that what can reasonably and honestly be discerned from John's words will be taken in relation to what history has revealed for us to know at this point; and that which remains so hazy that too little detail is available to arrive at solid conclusions we'll explore and offer perhaps 2 or 3 of the most likely possibilities acknowledging that it may turn out that none of these possibilities is correct.

With that, let's read about the final judgment of the 21 judgments now announced in Revelation; the 7th Bowl Judgment. Turn your Bibles to Revelation chapter 16.

RE-READ REVELATION CHAPTER 16:17 - end

The 7th Bowl Judgment is said to directly affect the "air". How did it affect the air? We're not told. As with so much of Revelation, various Bible commentators come up with various solutions to what the judgment on the "air" indicates such as a mention in Ephesians 2 that Satan is the prince of the power of the air. Or that the air was darkened by the smoke coming from the abyss. None of these are satisfying. The answer to this issue of God's judgment on the air goes back to something we've discussed in the last few lessons: the well established belief in John's day that all things that exist consist of some relative mixture of earth, water, fire, and air. These were known as the 4 Elements. As a reminder, this scientific theory (taken as absolute fact by most people in New Testament times) was first established around 5 centuries earlier than John, was also accepted in Jewish culture, and lasted even within the Church until a couple of centuries ago. So with this 7th Bowl Judgment upon the air, the Bowl Judgments have inflicted God's wrath upon human kind by means of targeting all 4 elements of nature, with the point being that God is sovereign over everything that exists.

I want to be sure that there is no misunderstanding; certainly the supposed 4 elements belief was not true, and the Bible is not trying to teach it as truth. Rather we must grasp that the way that God communicates with humans in every era, is by means of employing familiar signs and symbols and terms and illustrations and beliefs as used within the culture of the one or several to whom He is speaking. So, when the idea is to explain to John that God would disrupt every part of our environment including nature and the cosmos in His process of judging wicked mankind, He tells it to John using the terms and familiar mental pictures of John's day. If John lived in our time, in the United States, God would have communicated the same essential points and facts using entirely different terms and word pictures. So our job is to try to understand what those words meant to John, or even to Jewish culture in general in the 1st century, and then transfer that meaning relative to similar concepts in our modern time.

In verse 17 we're told that a loud voice came out of the Temple, from the throne, saying "It is done". Thinking back to our previous lesson, recall that the setting of this particular vision revolves mostly around God's Heavenly Temple. And that in order to get a good understanding of the intent, we need to compare the words used to describe God's invisible Temple in Heaven with the physical tangible earthly Temple in Jerusalem. The first thing we should notice is that while the English word "Temple" is usually used here, in fact that is not a great translation. The Greek word is *naos*, and it means ONLY the sanctuary portion of the Temple. That is, it refers specifically to the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. Since back in chapter 15 (when the Bowl Judgment process began) we learned that the heavenly sanctuary was emptied of all spiritual beings except for the presence of God (in the form of a smoke cloud) then it can only be God who declares that "it is done" (speaking from the place of the heavenly sanctuary) when the 7th Bowl is poured out. And, of course, it means that this is the final one of the 21 Judgments He has unleashed and there will be no more. This is followed in the next verse with standard biblical symbols indicating both God's presence and His wrath: lightening, voices, thunder, and an earthquake (very much like it was on Mt. Sinai shortly after Israel's exit

from Egypt). However as it has been with each Bowl Judgment, the effect of each calamity is felt worldwide and not just locally. So the earthquake is described as something greater than has ever occurred in mankind's history. Then in verse 19 we read of the some of the results of this massive tremor.

The first effect is said to be that the great city was split into 3 parts. What is the great city? There are generally 3 different answers offered for this. It is Jerusalem; or it is Babylon; or it is Rome. No matter which of these 3 you might choose to accept as the "great city" each has merit and each has its problems. And however you might answer it has much to do with the overall End Times doctrine you have learned, as well as having a direct effect on how you understand the use of the term "great city" in the next chapter we'll study, chapter 17. We could camp here a long time but won't. Instead I'll try to sum up the reasons for why these 3 cities are the suspected candidates of being "the great city".

First, Jerusalem. Back in Revelation chapter 11 we read this:

CJB Revelation 11:8 and their dead bodies will lie in the main street of the great city whose name, to reflect its spiritual condition, is "S'dom" and "Egypt"- the city where their Lord was executed on a stake.

Clearly in Revelation 11:8 the "great city" refers to Jerusalem because that is the city where "Their Lord" was executed on a stake (Christ certainly was not executed in Babylon or Rome). But also notice that God sees Jerusalem's spiritual condition as equal with that of Sodom and Egypt (about as bad as it gets) and thus worthy of judgment. So the term "great city" doesn't mean that God sees a city as having exceptional merit; rather it is a term that means that it is very important and influential in some negative or positive way. Some commentators say that because the next words after "great city" in Revelation 16 are "and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the Great", that the terms "great city", "cities of the nations", and "Babylon the Great" are 3 different entities that lay in apposition to one another. That is, taken together they form all that is being judged. So the "great city" represents Israelites, the cities of the nations represents gentiles, and Babylon the Great represents the wicked and idolatrous world system in general.

The second view is that the "great city" is Babylon. That the great city is Babylon and not Jerusalem is because it is Babylon the Great that is being judged and Babylon is the capital of Babylon the Great. Judging Babylon is a main theme of what has been going on in Revelation and what will continue to go on. Therefore the great city of Babylon, as well as the great cities of the gentiles, will be massively affected by the earthquake, and this is because in doing so God was remembering Babylon the Great, which is a symbolic term meaning the entire evil world system which is comprised of Babylon and the great cities of the gentile nations. In Revelation 18 we read:

CJB Revelation 18:10 Standing at a distance, for fear of her torment, they will say, "Oh no! The great city! Babel, the mighty city! In a single hour your judgment has come!"

So here, the "great city" is directly identified as Babylon.

The third view is that the "great city" is Rome. This is based almost entirely on the church doctrine that the Anti-Christ's Kingdom will be the reborn Roman Empire. But also because historically in John's day, the only city that might have been called "the great city" was Rome. There is nothing scripturally spoken about Rome in this regard, so for the time being I'm removing Rome from the list of likely candidates.

So, which of these is right? Which of these 3 candidates might be the "great city"? And why doesn't God just identify the "great city" rather than letting us struggle with it since all 3 were in existing and thriving in John's time? Let's begin with Jerusalem. Notice something interesting about the quote I used from Revelation 11:8 that the great city has a name that reflects its spiritual condition of Sodom and Egypt. This is difficult to comprehend because the name Jerusalem means something like "city of peace" since **shalem** comes from the root word **shalom** (and shalom means peace). However, we must also take into account that among the enormous population of the Arab speaking world the name of this city is Al Quds meaning the holy one, and (depending on which Muslim sect you ask) the holy one is referring either to Allah or to Mohammed the founder of Islam. What marks Sodom and Egypt as the antithesis of Israel is that they were Israel's enemies and they were idolatrous and constantly trying to thwart the will of God. That well describes Islam and in our time the eastern section of the city of Jerusalem is almost entirely Muslim. So might it be that during the time of the judgments in Revelation that Jerusalem... or at least a major part of it.... will be officially called Al Quds and not Jerusalem any longer, as an accommodation to Islam in order for there to be peace? That of course is my speculation, but we'll add some fuel to that fire later.

On the other hand, from a scriptural standpoint Jerusalem has already faced judgment by God through an earthquake in Revelation chapter 11, when a tenth of the city collapsed and 7,000 people were killed. In fact, oddly enough, this earthquake is said to have been confined to Jerusalem and its local suburbs. A ready rebuttal to this point is that we're told in Zechariah 14 that when God comes and sets foot on the Mt. of Olives (part of greater Jerusalem) that it will split and half of the mountain will move in one direction and half the other. And to that I say, true, but here in Revelation 16:19, we're told that the great city was split into **3** parts, and not the 2 parts as envisioned by Zechariah. Therefore, all things considered, I don't believe the term "great city" in Revelation 16:9 is referring to Jerusalem.

As for Rome being the great city there is simply no scriptural evidence. As I said earlier, the idea of the great city being Rome is born entirely from a manmade Church doctrine based on the belief that the Anti-Christ's kingdom will be a reconstituted Roman Empire. And while I understand the reasoning behind that belief, as time goes on I am less convinced of that possibility than ever.

As for the great city being Babylon. If we take Babylon to mean the real, original but rebuilt city of Babylon that will rise like a phoenix and become the world's new center of finance and commerce sometime before the Anti-Christ comes into power, then I am highly skeptical because it is too fanciful and without merit. Such a thing is not impossible but it is highly unlikely given the world conditions and trends of our time. The speculation that the Middle East.. war torn, backward, and knee deep in poverty... would somehow become the financial capital of the globe seems awfully fanciful. However, the term Babylon by John's era had

become a standard metaphor for idolatry and wickedness, and it was also a standard Jewish epithet for Rome. Thus I think the future city of Babylon is to be taken as symbolic of whatever city in the world might become the financial and commerce capital of the Anti-Christ's one-world kingdom. And as of today, there are two capitals.....New York City and London..... but we don't know what they might be in the future. Therefore I don't think the city's actual name will be Babylon, nor will its location be that of the ancient Babylon, but rather Babylon will be its character.

Therefore my conclusion is this: the term "great city" refers to the capital of finance and commerce at the time of the Anti-Christ's wicked kingdom. And the reason that no name is supplied for that great city might be because it didn't yet exist in John's day, however it may already exist in our time and indeed will exist in the End Times. Thus the meaning of verse 19 is that this center of world commerce and finance, wherever it is, will be hit with such a severe earthquake that fissures in the earth will literally open up and split it into 3 parts, and in addition all the cities of the gentile nations will be demolished (no doubt meaning the major cities and not every small town and village). In other words, the "great city" and all the other major cities of the gentile nations are of the same wicked character, and therefore are all part and parcel of God remembering Babylon the Great in the sense that He was inflicting His judgment on all that Babylon represented. Jerusalem would not be included in this, as God handles His own people and His own city differently even when judgment is involved. Remember: while God sees the wicked world in general as having the character of Babylon the Great, He sees Jerusalem as having the character of Sodom and Egypt. And these are not the same things and so they bring different judgments that result in different outcomes.

Verse 20 continues with an expanded description of this violent earthquake; it appears that it will be universal. The reference to islands fleeing and mountains disappearing has usually been taken more allegorically than literally by Bible commentators and especially the early Church Fathers. I'll offer only a couple of examples; but the point to be taken from their interpretations is to notice how quickly from the beginning of the Church they have distanced themselves from the Old Testament Prophets upon whose writings John's Apocalypse depends, and instead came up with some pretty fanciful explanations that sound ultra-spiritual but have no basis in fact.

From his Commentary on the Apocalypse, Oecumenius says:

"By islands he speaks of gentile churches, as the prophet says, The Lord has reigned, let the earth be glad and let the many islands rejoice. He calls them islands because they lifted their heads and rose above their bitter and distasteful idolatry..... But that he refers to demons when he mentions mountains, even the holy psalmist shows, singing, The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, for he is coming.

Primasius says:

It is my view that by the terms islands and also mountains the church is signified on account of the greatness of stability.

I don't think anymore need be added as virtually every early Church Father I could find on this subject fell somewhere along the same lines as these two. My view is that there is no reason to take the meaning of Revelation 16:20 other than for what it says. The earthquake is going to be so violent that islands in the seas will move and mountains will collapse. We know already that especially on the Pacific Ring of Fire that follows the coastlines of South and North America, as well as Asia and then turns south and finally east towards New Zealand, that 90% of the world's earthquakes come from there. This giant crack in the earth's crust allows volcanoes to erupt both above and below the seas, regularly forming new islands and at times destroying existing ones. The famous Island of Krakatoa that was primarily a giant volcano blew up in 1883, and essentially obliterated it. So it is likely that this sort of activity is what is contemplated only on a massive scale; something that is already known to be entirely possible.

As for the enormous hailstones of verse 21, this brings us back to the plagues of Egypt. The supernatural hail that fell on Egypt was not only incredibly rare, but it was mixed with fire. Here the supernatural hail is simply enormous in size; nothing could stand up to giant 70 or 100 pound chunks of ice falling at a terrifying velocity from the sky. We should note here that every type of plague heaped upon Egypt has now been used to punish wicked human kind, except for the death of the firstborn. And what was humanity's response to these judgments? Instead of humbly falling down in awestruck worship and pleading for mercy, they cursed God for their troubles demonstrating the same hardened hearts as we saw with Pharaoh. These are not only the unredeemed, but also the unredeemable.

Let's move on Revelation chapter 17.

READ REVELATION CHAPTER 17 all

Please observe something: beginning with chapter 14 the final judgment of Babylon the Great was prophesied even though we're still dealing with it in ever greater detail in chapter 17 (and will be through chapter 19).

CJB Revelation 14:8 *Another angel, a second one, followed, saying, "She has fallen! She has fallen! Babel the Great! She made all the nations drink the wine of God's fury caused by her whoring!"*

The point I'm making is that we have to be careful not to take John's visions as though they are being rolled out in chronological order. Rather at times we get brief snapshots, only later to have the subject revisited and then we get more explicit details. Thus after the statement a few chapters ago about Babylon the Great is fallen, the first verse of chapter 17 says:

CJB Revelation. 17:1 *"Come, I will show you the judgment of the great whore who is sitting by many waters."*

This is but an extension of the Bowl Judgments as the opening verse explains that it was one of the angels who held one of the 7 bowls that is going to further explore just how Babylon the Great is being judged. Here Babylon the Great is given another figurative title as the great harlot or great whore; and the titles represent a distinct characteristic of Babylon. What we are

reading about is not a person, but rather it is figurative of the character of an entire kingdom: Satan's Kingdom that at the moment is being run by the Anti-Christ. The phrase that the great harlot was established upon many waters means that many peoples and nations were under her spell and likely under her sovereignty. In the Bible a harlot or prostitute or a person who commits adultery were guilty of the same basic crime: idolatry. Verse 2 explains that this harlot has committed adultery with many kings of the earth. That is, she has lured the leaders of nations away from worship and obedience to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into worshipping and following non-gods. Often their "non-gods" are merely the riches and wealth of the world and its many forbidden pleasures. Today those non-gods include science and intellectualism. The harlot has also seduced the earth-dwellers. Earth dwellers are those common humans who are worldly. This is in contrast to God-worshippers whose eyes and hopes are set on Heaven. And we are told that these world leaders and their citizens have become intoxicated.... drunk.... with the passion of this harlot's impurity. They desire to come into union with her, to become exactly what she is, and to have whatever it is that she has.

Let's pause here for a moment to define in common terms what is being described: it is the opposite of everything Godly. Babylon and the harlot are empowered by Satan, the primordial source of evil. And what is evil? Everything that God is against. Whatever is God's character, Satan's is the opposite. The harlot by nature is therefore impure, unclean. Consorting with her contaminates her partner with impurity; this is a principle taught back in Leviticus about the nature of ritual impurity: it is contagious. Thus what we're going to find in chapter 17 is a series of actions and descriptions that are also metaphors that depict an intentional mocking and mimicking of God. It is like the way a mirror automatically reverses an image. Depending on your Bible version, the final words of verse 2 say that the people of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication, or with the wine of her immorality. Here are some words that we are meant to take literally and symbolically at the same time.

The Greek word being translated as fornication or immorality is **porneia**, from which we get the English word pornography. This literally means that all of God's laws and commands on sexuality and sexual behavior have been turned on their head, and the commission of immorality has become celebrated and declared as good. Symbolically it means illicit unions between the harlot and her client. We have a saying in the West about "making a deal with the Devil" in order to achieve or acquire something important to us. Or perhaps closely associating ourselves with a person, a government, a business, or a religion that is anti-God in order to accomplish a goal. That is, while the illicit relationship may not be sexual, nonetheless we are willing to join ourselves to that which God finds wicked and immoral in His sight. God sees these actions as a spiritual defection from His Kingdom into Satan's Kingdom.

Now, as odd as it might seem to you, there are Bible commentators who believe that in chapter 17, the Harlot of Babylon is Israel and Jerusalem. J. Massyngherde Ford is one example. These commentators, like Ford, will often quote Hosea as their primary source. There are reasons given for this viewpoint but I suspect rather than the quoted scriptures it mostly comes from an underlying mindset that stems from a rather widespread fundamental doctrine within Christianity that God has dispensed with Israel and adopted the gentile Church in its place. For some reason these commentators overlook or minimize the fundamental principle that we just discussed: that biblically speaking Babylon always represents the opposite, the antithesis, of

everything good and everything promised to Israel and Jerusalem. It is not that Israel and Jerusalem have remained pure; but rather a close reading of Hosea, for example, shows that despite Israel and Jerusalem's sins and faithlessness towards God, nonetheless He has mercy on them because they are set apart and chosen. And so instead of destroying them or sending them permanently away, He punishes them (sometimes by exile) and then takes them back, and much of this actually occurs in the End Times as also demonstrated by Ezekiel 37.

CJB Ezekiel 37:21-28 ²¹ *Then say to them that Adonai ELOHIM says: 'I will take the people of Isra'el from among the nations where they have gone and gather them from every side and bring them back to their own land. ²² I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Isra'el; and one king will be king for all of them. They will no longer be two nations, and they will never again be divided into two kingdoms. ²³ "They will never again defile themselves with their idols, their detestable things, or any of their transgressions; but I will save them from all the places where they have been living and sinning; and I will cleanse them, so that they will be my people, and I will be their God. ²⁴ My servant David will be king over them, and all of them will have one shepherd; they will live by my rulings and keep and observe my regulations.*

²⁵ *They will live in the land I gave to Ya'akov my servant, where your ancestors lived; they will live there- they, their children, and their grandchildren, forever; and David my servant will be their leader forever.*

²⁶ *I will make a covenant of peace with them, an everlasting covenant. I will give to them, increase their numbers, and set my sanctuary among them forever. ²⁷ My home will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. ²⁸ The nations will know that I am ADONAI, who sets Isra'el apart as holy, when my sanctuary is with them forever."*

This tenderness and intimacy God is showing towards His people is certainly not what is happening with Babylon in the Book of Revelation. Here is Babylon's destiny:

CJB Revelation 18:21 ²¹ *Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a great millstone, and hurled it into the sea, saying, "With violence like this will the great city Bavel be hurled down, never to be found again!*

CJB Revelation 19:1 *After these things, I heard what sounded like the roar of a huge crowd in heaven, shouting, "Halleluyah! The victory, the glory, the power of our God! ² For his judgments are true and just. He has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her whoring. He has taken vengeance on her who has the blood of his servants on her hands." ³ And a second time they said, "Halleluyah! Her smoke goes up forever and ever!"*

Babylon is the evil world system with its evil leader Satan. It is not Israel or Jerusalem.

Verse 3 of Revelation 17 says that John was carried off in the Spirit; this is a rather standard experience with the OT prophets. In the Spirit (meaning John was not physically transported there) John found himself in a wilderness or desert. A wilderness is indeed a desolate place;

but it is also a place where dependence upon God is at the highest and when preparation for a divinely assigned task occurs. It was in the wilderness that Moses went to meet God in the burning bush. It was in the wilderness that John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Christ. It was in the wilderness for 40 years that Israel learned to depend on God, and when they did, then He allowed them into the Promised Land.

In this ecstatic state, John was shown a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, which was full of blasphemous names; this beast had 7 heads and 10 horns. Moments ago I told you that in this chapter we'll see Satan, Babylon and the Harlot mocking and mimicking God. So sure enough we find a woman sitting upon a beast. Back in chapter 12, we saw another and different women.

^{CJB} Revelation 12:1 *Now a great sign was seen in heaven- a woman clothed with the sun, under her feet the moon, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ² She was pregnant and about to give birth, and she screamed in the agony of labor.*

³ *Another sign was seen in heaven there was a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven royal crowns.*

^{CJB} Revelation 12:5-8 ⁵ *She gave birth to a son, a male child, the one who will rule all the nations with a staff of iron. But her child was snatched up to God and his throne; ⁶ and she fled into the desert, where she has a place prepared by God so that she can be taken care of for 1,260 days. ⁷ Next there was a battle in heaven- Mikha'el and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. ⁸ But it was not strong enough to win, so that there was no longer any place for them in heaven.*

Can you see what is happening? In chapter 12, we have the righteous woman clothed with the sun, a crown of 12 stars (symbolizing Israel) giving birth to the Savior and this is a sign in Heaven. But then we see this dragon with 7 heads and 10 horns, Satan, who wants to harm the pregnant woman and devour her child. That is, he wants to thwart God's plans for redemption. Next there is a battle in Heaven for the sake of this woman and child and Satan loses; he is permanently kicked out. Major point: these events are all occurring in the spiritual sphere, in Heaven.

But now in chapter 17 the scene shifts to planet earth. We have another and very different woman; an evil woman, bearing the opposite characteristics of the righteous woman of chapter 12. The righteous woman of chapter 12 represents ideal Israel and God's plans for redemption. The evil woman of chapter 17 is the Harlot of Babylon and represents the evil world system that wants to challenge God's plans. In chapter 12 Satan confronts the woman, Israel in the spiritual sphere, and then God and His angels defeat Satan in Heaven. Now in chapter 17, we have Satan's earthly physical counterpart..... the Beast with 7 heads and 10 horns.... who is the anti-Christ.... a real, live physical human being, who teams up with the Harlot of Babylon, which is the physical tangible wicked world system. And what are they teaming up for? War!! This war to determine who will have eternal dominion over earth will be a shadow and pattern after the war that was fought in Heaven; and ultimately it will have the same result. As we'll find a little later in this chapter the war on earth will be between the forces of Satan and his Anti-

Christ versus the forces of God and His Christ..... the Lamb..... at the Battle of Armageddon in Israel!

We'll stop here and pick up again next time in chapter 17.