

Study #5 in preparation for:
April 4

Revelation 16:1-18:24

The War of the Lamb

“They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.” Revelation 17:14

Perspective: St. John's audit of evil is only half done. He has traced the ugly side of evil to its specific and distinctive source. He has evil's number, pulled up its file, and knows its account. But evil's hideous strength is not only tyrannical, it is beautiful. There is a seductive side to evil that the inhabitants of the earth find very appealing. The beautiful side of evil is personified in the great prostitute, dressed in purple and scarlet, glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She seduces the world with her intoxicating wine of abominations and adulteries. She wears her title proudly:

MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH

With her golden cup of opportunity and pleasure, the great prostitute invites the world to her party, even as the bride of Christ is invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb. She is the great city with all of its attractions and achievements. Taken together the great prostitute and the great city embody pagan culture. Instead of an ugly and sinister culture, we see an attractive and appealing culture. The richly attired woman, adorned with expensive jewelry and surrounded by luxury, is a picture of the success fantasy and the cult of self worship. She is the goddess of bodily perfection and the epitome of the human quest for self-fulfillment.

After all that has been said about the dragon and the beasts we would expect to find hell on earth, but instead we see a parody of heaven on earth; a great city of power and luxury, riches and splendor, commerce and capitalism. No mention is made of the underside of evil. Nothing is said of poverty, homelessness, destitution, abandonment, abortion, AIDS, addictions, violence and crime. The Great City of Babylon is the world's marketplace, trading in precious metals, fine fashions, luxury products, and every conceivable commodity, including the "bodies and souls of human beings." No one appears to be asking, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mt.16:26).

The great city at the end of time, at the end of human civilization as we know it, has all the conveniences and refinements one could imagine: fine dining, beautiful music, luxury living, skilled craftsmanship and powerful people. But John calls it "a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit" and finishes his description of the great city by saying, "In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed in the earth" (18:24). Evil has been great for the economy and the arts, but awful for the saints. Earlier in his vision (chp.11), John gave a tragic parody on Christmas in the great city. The death of the saints will be celebrated by the exchange of gifts in a holiday atmosphere.

Those who lament the fall of the great city cannot get over the fact that such wealth and power and luxury could all be destroyed in an hour! All the buying and selling, entertaining and creating, investing and celebrating is brought to a halt in an hour. The great city appeared as enduring as Chinese history, as proud as French culture, and as unsinkable as the Titanic, but it crashes without warning, like a house of cards.

"In one hour such great wealth
has been brought to ruin!"...
"In one hour she has been brought to ruin."

The mighty angel is unsympathetic, however, and calls for celebration because the time of idolatries and deception is finally over. This is the sober prelude that ushers in the Hallelujah chorus.

"Rejoice over her, O heaven!
Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her for the way she treated you."

The two-sided description of evil is sobering and disturbing. The culture is terminal, but we don't have to die with the culture. The Titanic will sink, but we don't have to go down with the ship. There is healing through the blood of the lamb; there is salvation in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The surprising fact in the face of this horrendous description of evil is the simplicity of John's Spirit-inspired spiritual direction. For all the complexity and power of evil, our defense is straight-forward. How should we live for Christ in a world that is not just sloughing toward Gomorrah but has arrived? To use John's words, "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints." John has nothing new to add. It's what the saints have always done: prayer and obedience, worship and witness, purity and truth-telling. Faithfulness requires wisdom, the ability to discern the true nature of evil. Perseverance involves staying alert, being ready to flee on a moments notice (16:15). Maturity means cultivating a mind for God in a mindless world.

We take to heart the voice from heaven, which says, "Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins" (18:4). We know the difference between being in the world and of the world. "My prayer," said Jesus, "is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent

them into the world" (John 17:15-18). We are not looking to God to make us successful in the great city. Saints may infiltrate the structures and systems of the great city, but they will never feel at home there. "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb.13:14).