

REVELATION—UNVEILING THE END, ACT 3 THE FINAL CURTAIN

STUDY SIX

The Final Exit of Worldwide Religion

Revelation 17:1–18

Ours is a world that follows many gods. It embraces a philosophy of religion based on human effort for human achievement and human glory. It's a human-made, human-glorifying system of thinking. Indeed, one of the greatest enemies of the Christian life is a religious life.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IN his 2005 commencement address to the graduates of Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, renowned American novelist David Foster Wallace made a profound observation:

In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship.¹

Though Wallace never claimed to be a follower of Jesus Christ, his statement is true. Every person does indeed worship something. We will worship either the living God, creator of heaven and earth . . . or something else.

God created humanity to worship Him and to enjoy His presence. Yet, Adam and Eve, the original worshipers, wanted to be like God, so they chose to worship themselves instead of Him. Today, their offspring follow in their example, worshipping a whole host of false gods like wealth, beauty, power, and intellect.

And as Wallace later observed, worshipping these things simply “will eat you alive.”

In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we will consider the source of these false objects of worship—the religion of this fallen world—in the image of an ancient city called Babylon. Though Babylon’s influence today is strong, its wall will crumble before the one *true* God, Jesus Christ, who alone is worthy of worship.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Sometimes prayer feels like just another “religious” task—another box to check in a long spiritual to-do list. This kind of attitude misses the purpose of prayer. God wants us to talk to Him because He wants us to be in *relationship* with Him. He wants to hear from you. He wants to get to know your deepest worries and fears, joys and triumphs.

Take some time to calm your mind and to quiet your heart. Then spend a few moments talking with your loving heavenly Father. And remember, you’re spending time with someone who truly loves you.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Revelation 16 records the final cycle of judgment. In this cycle, John saw seven angels each pour out a bowl of God’s wrath upon the earth. The seventh bowl—the *final* judgment—culminated in the defeat of Babylon.

In *Revelation 16:19*, John described this decisive defeat: “The great city of Babylon split into three sections, and the cities of many nations fell into heaps of rubble. So God remembered all of Babylon’s sins, and he made her drink the cup that was filled with the wine of his fierce wrath.”

The next major section of Revelation zooms in on the fall of Babylon, the wicked city that has stood against God and His good purposes from the very beginning.



Observation: Babylon’s Evil

Read all of *Revelation 17* slowly, carefully, and deliberately to clearly observe its many facets. Try not to get too sidetracked determining the meaning of these details.² We will consider their meaning in the next phase of the study.

Describing the World’s Religion—Revelation 17:1–6

John’s vision began with an angel showing him a picture of judgment against “the great prostitute”—and not against the prostitute only, but also against all those who grew “drunk by the wine of her immorality” (*Revelation 17:1–2*).

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In what ways did John describe this great prostitute in *Revelation 17:3–4*? According to *17:5*, what was this prostitute’s name?

John noticed in *17:6* that the prostitute was intoxicated—not on wine, but on something else. What made this wicked woman so drunk?

Understanding the World’s Religion—Revelation 17:7–13, 15, 18

As John watched this vision, he stared “in complete amazement” wondering what this vision might mean (*Revelation 17:6*). Thankfully, his angelic guide recognized the perplexed look on John’s face, so he said, “I will tell you the mystery of this woman and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns on which she sits” (*17:7*). The angel then offered an interpretation to John.

What did the angel say each of the following images represented?

The Beast’s Heads (*17:9–10*): _____

The Beast (*17:8, 11*): _____

The Beast’s Horns (*17:12–13*): _____

The Waters (*17:15*): _____

The Prostitute (*17:18*): _____

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Defeating the World’s Religion—Revelation 17:14, 16–17

Many of the images in John’s vision represented kings—rulers Satan used to carry out his wicked plans against God and His children. What would these rulers band together to pursue in [Revelation 17:14](#)? What would be the result of their effort? Why would this happen?

At the beginning of John’s vision, the prostitute rode on the back of the scarlet beast—showing unity and cooperation. According to [17:16–17](#), how did this relationship change by the end of the vision? What did this change reveal about God’s sovereignty?

The angel helped John make sense of the key elements of his vision, but there are more layers of interpretive truth to peel back. Let’s see what timeless lessons this passage can teach us.



Interpretation: Babylon’s Effect

Interpreting the meaning of *every* image in this passage may feel impossible. Thankfully, the angel offered guidance to help John make sense of the *most important* images.

For example, he identified the prostitute who is drunk on the blood of Christian martyrs as Babylon ([Revelation 17:5](#)). The Babylonian Empire, however, had fallen *centuries* before John wrote. Babylon fell to Persia, which later fell to Greece, which then fell to Rome. And Rome ruled the Mediterranean world in John’s day.

What would John’s original readers have understood the image of Babylon to represent? How are readers of Revelation today to understand the meaning of Babylon and its far-reaching influence? For some guidance as you interpret these images, consult a commentary, like Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Insights on Revelation* or [Constable’s Notes](#) at netbible.org.³

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The prostitute called Babylon rode on a seven-headed beast with ten horns. John wrote that the seven heads represent seven kings (*Revelation 17:9*). The beast itself represents an eighth king (*17:11*). And the ten horns represent ten additional kings (*17:12*). What does this clarification reveal about how Babylon wages war against the Lamb and His people?

In John's vision, Babylon was closely associated with the Satan-empowered beast introduced in *13:1–10*. One of this beast's essential goals was to draw worship away from the Lamb (*13:4, 8; 17:8, 13*). What are some of the characteristics of false religion? How do these traits contrast with the markers of a true, faith-based relationship with Jesus Christ?

Religion has to do with works. Christianity is based on faith. Religion is what I do for God. Christianity is what God has already done for me. Religion is an effort. Christianity is a gift. See the difference? —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Babylon's Origin

From the very beginning to the very end of Scripture, Babylon has represented the earthly capital of evil. In Revelation, we see that hideous sin in full bloom, and in Genesis, we watch Satan plant that wicked seed in *Genesis 11:1–9*.

According to *11:3–4*, what did the people who settled in Babylonia set out to do? Why did they want to do this?

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How did God react to this news in [Revelation 11:5–7](#)? Why did He react this way? In other words, what was problematic about what the settlers of Babylonia wanted to accomplish?

What did God ultimately do in [11:8–9](#) to judge the wicked intentions of these people? How did the great prostitute in Revelation attempt to defy God and undo His work at Babel? See [Revelation 17:15](#).

Babel, Babylon, Babylonia. It isn't so much a place as it is a system of thinking—one that is apart from and against God. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Babylon's Demise

The great prostitute Babylon and her league of wicked rulers want to march against the Lamb to slay His faithful followers. But Revelation reminds us of good news—that “the Lamb will defeat them because he is Lord of all lords and King of all kings” ([Revelation 17:14](#)). This passage reveals three timeless truths:

1. Though religious activity often feels full and alive, it actually is empty and dead.
2. Though Satan always appears impressive and effective, he truly is evil and deceptive.
3. Though God sometimes seems absent and uninvolved, He always is present and engaged.

In what ways do you sense the influence of Babylon reaching your cultural context? What does it look like for you practically, as a follower of the Lamb, to resist this influence?

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How might you be tempted to live a life of religious activity rather than faithful devotion to God? What does it look like for you to carry out Christian practices (like prayer, Bible study, church attendance, and giving) without making them feel like a religious chore?

The kingdom of Babylon is wicked and imposing, and its influence has saturated the whole earth. Yet John’s vision assures us that the kingdom of heaven will one day take its place. Satan, sin, and death will be banished from this world, and we will sing a song of praise to God as we shout . . .

Babylon is fallen! (Revelation 18:2)



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, it is tempting to follow the ways of Babylon. To try to glorify myself over You. To try to earn Your love. To try to get myself out of my messes without Your help. Thank You for the reminder that I cannot earn anything by my own effort. You have already given me everything I need through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In His name I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1. David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water” (commencement address, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, May 21, 2005), <http://bulletin-archive.kenyon.edu/x4280.html>.
2. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the article, “*How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?*”
3. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Revelation*, Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2014)

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