

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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**Broadcast Date:** 19 March 2000

**No.** T0102

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## **Revelation 15-18 - The Seven vials and the Mystery of Babylon**

The task that we have before us this morning is to give a brief exposition of Revelation 15-18. The subject contained in this passage is the Seven Vials of the last judgement and the overthrow of Mystery Babylon the Great. Time will only allow an outline of these chapters to be given with little attention to detail.

Chapter 15 opens with a heavenly scene and a company singing praises to God in the song of Moses and, the song of the Lamb. Who are they? Verse 2 provides the answer; they are those who "had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark and over the number of his name". 13:16-18 tells of the impositions made by the beast during the period of great tribulation. During that period there will be a faithful remnant of Jews who will refuse obeisance to him and will consequently suffer martyrdom. These are they.

John then sees the temple opened in heaven. He had seen it before as is recorded in 11:19 but on that occasion he had also seen the Ark of the Covenant but here it fails to appear. In chapter 11 he is reminded of God's pledge to His people, but in chapter 15 it is His wrath to all the nations that is about to be outpoured and which is therefore paramount. From the temple seven angels emerge and to them are given the seven bowls filled with the wrath of God – the last of the judgements of God which are about to be poured out on the earth, to be immediately followed by the wrath of the Lamb.

In Chapter 16 we have the pouring out of the bowls of the judgements of God. It is noticeable that the bowl judgements bear a similarity to the trumpet judgements, particularly the first four. The trumpet judgements fall upon a third or fourth part of the earth, sea, rivers and sun – a restricted area covering the old Roman world, but the bowl judgements are more universal in character and would embrace the whole earth. Perhaps the trumpets and bowls are not strictly consecutive but have a degree of overlap. Certainly these are the final judgements on a world where the light of the gospel had shone and where Christ had been preached: the gospel had not been believed and Christ had been rejected. The bowl judgements are similar to the plagues that had afflicted Egypt so many centuries before. Water becomes blood; there are outbreaks of skin disease, the sun is affected. In Egypt all this was literally true but in the Book of the Revelation where symbols abound these descriptions are, no doubt, typical and it is the underlying moral principles that should be looked for.

The apostasy is complete, Christianity has been abandoned and men in the words of Jude 12 are "twice dead". In the case of the last three bowls the objectives of the judgements are more specific. The fifth bowl is poured out upon the throne of the beast, that is the very heart and centre of the political power of the day, the head of the revived Roman Empire. The result is complete moral darkness overshadows the whole region, verse 10. The sixth bowl is emptied on the River Euphrates, an event which is very significant. The Times of the Gentiles, which commenced with the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, is coming to an end, and judgement is about to be meted out upon the nations. The armies of the kings of the earth who will be the servants of God for this purpose are coming together and verse 12 tells us that the waters of this great river will be dried up. The Euphrates was the eastern boundary of the former Roman Empire and the way is now prepared to enable ready access to the military might who will come from beyond that border. Verses 13-16 are a kind of parenthesis in the vision during which John learns how the nations are brought together. He sees three frogs, agents of Satan, demons working miracles to gather the kings of the earth for the ultimate and final battle, that of Armageddon. The battle itself is described in 19:17-21, but here we are simply told that at this time the Lord will come as a thief and blessed are those who watch and keep their garments undefiled. Even at this time there are those who are faithful to their God.

Chapters 17 and 18 give an account of Mystery Babylon chapter 17 telling who she is and her downfall, whilst chapter 18 describes her association with the other great powers during her history. Babylon means confusion especially confusion which arises out of mixing, and she must not be associated with Babylon the capital of Nebuchadnezzar's empire which had long passed away. Who is she? In 21:9 one of the angels who had been entrusted with the pouring out of the bowls says to John "Come here and I will show thee the bride, the Lamb's wife". She, of course, is the true church, the company which Ephesians 5:25 tells us is that company whom Christ loved and for which He died. In 17:1 the same angel, apparently so, invites John to "Come here and I will show thee the judgement of the great harlot".

He does so and John sees a woman arrayed in purple and scarlet adorned with all manner of precious jewels and seated upon a scarlet coloured beast. Her name for all to see is inscribed upon her forehead; "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." She is drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. I am convinced that what John is looking at is a symbolic portrayal of Satan's counterfeit of the true church. Counterfeiting has always been one of Satan's chief methods of deluding men from responding to the Lord's invitation to "Come unto me" and so by default to enlist under his banner. Take a present day example: How many preachers there are who, in all their sermons, never mention the sinnership of man, the eternal punishment that awaits those who die in their sins, nor that forgiveness is available through the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are false prophets – counterfeits.

There is another clear indication that our interpretation of John's vision is correct and it is this. The apostle Paul was given the commission to reveal the truth of the Church or better Assembly and his letter to the Ephesians is his chief exposition of the subject. In Ephesians 3:1-9 he tells how he, by revelation, was given to know the mystery that in other ages was not known, and then he goes on to say how that mystery was the bringing together of both Jews and Gentiles into one body, in other words the church of Christ. The true church was a mystery revealed by Paul; the spurious church was a mystery and it is revealed by John in his vision. He sees her as sitting upon many waters and verse 15 interprets these as "peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues" showing the vast extent of her domain and influence.

The beast upon which she takes her seat is described in verses 8-11 and is easily recognised as the first beast of chapter 13 which arises from the sea and who is the head of the revived Roman Empire. A comparison of the two passages establishes this fact: his seven heads are seven mountains, verse 9 and Rome is well known as the city of seven hills: additionally there are seven kings representing the seven different types of government which successively ruled over Rome; five of these had passed, the sixth was in power at the time of John's vision, and the seventh has yet to appear. His role and reign becomes increasingly blasphemous, so much so that he is looked upon as continuing for a short space and is then looked upon as the eighth even though he is one of the seven. As such he goes down to perdition. The ten horns are ten kings, verse 12 and would be the ten kingdoms which will comprise the revived empire. They have no real authority but receive their power from the beast whom they wholeheartedly support.

Let us revert to Mystery Babylon, the harlot. In Acts 2 we have the formation of the true church when the Holy Spirit baptises all the believers into one body. Oh brethren, what halcyon days they were, with thousands responding to the gospel and all "continuing steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers". But, sad to say, by the time we reach chapter 20 we find Paul having to warn the elders of the church at Ephesus of impending infiltration and corruption, "grievous wolves entering in among you ... of your own selves men shall arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

Then when he writes his last letter, 2 Timothy, chapters 2 and 3 indicate that apostasy was already far advanced. The apostolic age had scarcely passed away before false doctrines were being propagated, clericalism and other unscriptural practices were introduced and finally the Papacy was officially introduced with the pontification of Pope Gregory the Great in the year AD 590. Under Satan it rapidly developed in power and wealth bringing in more and more anti-biblical innovations along the way, being only temporarily halted by the Reformation in the 16th century. Today as we look at the religious world we can see that events are swiftly approaching their climax.

The Ecumenical Movement is crying out for unification at any cost and we have Christendom embracing every company calling itself Christian and embracing the true church itself. But soon, according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, Christ will come into the air and call His own to be with Himself, and "so shall we ever be with the Lord". What is left is what we have here in our chapter and the time for judgement has come. How is it brought about? By the very power that she has tyrannised for so long a time.

She has become so authoritative and overbearing that the ten kings can stand it no longer and verse 16 tells us that they "shall hate the harlot, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and shall burn her with fire." And verse 17 adds that in so doing they are carrying out the will of God. Like Nebuchadnezzar of old for such a specific act as judgement God can and does use whom He will to carry out His purposes. So ends this monstrosity the seed of which we read in the letter to Thyatira in chapter 2, which grows into the great Papal empire, into present day Christendom and finally ends as Mystery, Babylon, the Great Harlot.

18:1-2 describes what she was and then gives an account of the relationships that she had had with all the worldly powers during her history. In verse 7 we have her boastful claim – she sat as a queen, was no widow and would see no sorrow. How little did she know.

Verse 9, she has illicit relationships with the kings of the earth. Verse 11 to 16, she has been the sponsor of the merchants of the earth, trading in all types of merchandise including the souls of men, verse 13. The maritime nations particularly feel their loss which came with her overthrow, verse 17. She was guilty of the blood of the prophets and

saints, verse 24 – who has not heard of the inquisition and the thousands of saintly men and women who perished at its instigation. Yet despite all this these powers mourn and wail at her demise. How worldly and corrupt has the professing church become.

The final verses demonstrate a rejoicing in heaven by saints, apostles and prophets. All such had suffered during her existence and now and now God has judged her according to their verdict upon her. The time for rejoicing has come.

These particular events are, of course, still future but the disciples of our Lord are living in the days immediately preceding them and surely it is incumbent upon us all, out of love for and in obedience to, to respond to the exhortation of 18: 5 and “Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues”. May we all have grace to do so.

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