THE WEDDING SUPPER OF THE LAMB

Revelation 17:1–19:10

Key Verse: 19:9

“Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ And he added, ‘These are the true words of God.’”

Some people pretend to be independent and self-sufficient. But we human beings all are influenced. We can be influenced by people, by our situation, and by the world. As Christians, sometimes we’re influenced for good; but most of the time, the influences around us are bad. In today’s passage an angel shows John a vision of a woman who’s a bad influence on the whole world. She’s a metaphor for the bad influence the world has had on Christians from the beginning until today. Then John sees a vision of a different woman: the bride of the Lamb. This vision helps us have hope. This hope enables us to overcome bad influences and be a blessing in this dark world. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at 17:1,2. This angel is one of the seven who had the seven bowls. He says he’s going to show John “the punishment of the great prostitute.” He’s referring back to the announcement in 14:8: “‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great,’ which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” He’s also referring to the prediction in 16:9: “The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed. God remembered Babylon the Great and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath.” We learn more about this prostitute in verse 5: “The name written on her forehead was a mystery: BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” We learn that the kings of the earth committed adultery with her (17:2; cf. 18:3,9) and that she corrupted the earth by her adulteries (19:2).

Why is she called “Babylon”? Babylon was an ancient city in modern-day Iraq, about 50 miles south of Bagdad, along the Euphrates River. It became the capital of the Babylonian Empire. Its first major dynasty was long, from 1900–1600 BC begun by Hammurabi, and its second major dynasty was short, from 605–549 BC under Nebuchadnezzer II. During that second dynasty, Babylon ruled the world with impressive power, and the Jews from Judea were invaded and taken there as slaves. Daniel the prophet lived in Babylon. Babylon was powerful, rich and idolatrous. It came to symbolize a time when God’s people were oppressed and forced to adopt the ways of the world. When John saw these visions in around AD 95, the Roman Empire ruled the world. And it was very much like the Babylonian Empire. The Roman Empire was powerful, rich and idolatrous, and God’s people were scattered in many places and seemed small, weak and easily influenced. The term “Babylon” came to refer to any powerfully corrupting influence.

Another important reason for calling this woman by this name is what happened to the Babylonian Empire in the end. According to the Book of Daniel, it fell in one night. King Belshazzar was having a big party drinking wine with a thousand of his nobles, his wives and concubines. They were using goblets of gold and silver taken from the Jerusalem temple. They thought their empire would last forever. And when they got drunk, they were praising the gods of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. Then there was a mysterious handwriting on the wall, predicting the end of Babylon’s glorious reign. That night Belshazzar was killed, and Darius king of Persia took over (Da5). This famous Bible story reminded God’s people that kings of the world tend to be very corrupt, adulterous and idolatrous, and that God can overthrow them so quickly. The prophet Isaiah also predicted it. The earlier prediction in Revelation 14:8 is based on Isaiah’s prophecy in 21:9: “Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground.” The fall of Babylon was great news for God’s people who’d been oppressed by them. Afterwards God began to work to bring them back to the promised land. In the same way, in Revelation we see that the prostitute Babylon the Great will fall, right before God restores his people and brings them to heaven.

So the prostitute Babylon the Great represents all world powers that seduce people away from God and cause them to be idolatrous and corrupt. Look at verse 3. Here, a woman is sitting on a scarlet beast covered with blasphemous names, seven heads and ten horns. It’s the same beast mentioned back in 12:3. It tells us that this woman was empowered by Satan. Look at verse 4. It’s her luxurious wealth and beauty that make her so alluring. The gold cup in her hand contains a wine that drives people crazy (14:8; cf. Jer51:7). It symbolizes how the world still entices people with its materialism and pleasures. Look again at verse 5. This tells us that the beautiful woman is actually a hideous prostitute and the source of all the abominations of the world. It means, stay away from her. Look at verse 6. This also shows us how evil she is. She’s responsible for the shed blood of God’s holy people, those who bore testimony to Jesus at the cost of their lives. It symbolizes how hostile the materialistic, pleasure-seeking world is to godly Christians. When we want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, we’ll be persecuted (2Ti3:12) because people who live for money and pleasure think we’re strange that we don’t join them (1Pe4:3–5).

In verses 7,8 the angel shows John who the beast the woman sits on is. He’s the one mentioned earlier, who would deceive the world into worshiping him by pretending to die and rise again like Jesus (13:12–14). In verse 9 the angel says the seven heads on the beast represent seven hills. In the Bible, hills can represent kingdoms. The number seven symbolizes completeness. So these seven hills represent all the worldly kingdoms and nations opposed to Christ. In verse 10 they also represent seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. So many people have tried to interpret this in so many ways. Some said it’s a secret code for Roman emperors, but that seems unlikely. The main point is that they’re all opposed to God, and that the seventh king coming will remain only a little while. He’ll be replaced by an eighth king who is actually the beast, the antichrist. And the point is, he’s going to his destruction (11). In verses 12,13 the angel says the ten horns on the beast represent ten kings who’ve not yet received a kingdom; they’ll give their authority to the beast. Here ten is not literal but symbolic of all the earth. It seems so scary: All world leaders giving their authority to the beast, to wage war against Jesus and his people. But read verse 14. When he comes again, Jesus the Lamb, who is Lord of lords and King of kings, will fight against this great array of worldly powers and defeat them, and with him will be all his called, chosen and faithful followers. It tells us that we have hope, and that there’s nothing to fear.

The angel goes on to interpret the vision. Look at verse 15. The prostitute sitting over all these people means she has a strong influence over all the world. Look at verse 16. Shockingly, the beast and the ten horns will hate the prostitute, bring her to ruin, leave her naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. It’s horrible, but it shows how the devil works. He uses people for his own purposes, and then spits them out like garbage. It’s still happening today. It also tells us that this intimidating, seductive world power against Christ and his people will eventually destroy itself. Read verse 17. This tells us that God is in control even of the most wicked world powers, to accomplish his own purposes. When we see wicked people and rulers and nations holding sway, we need to remember that God is in control. Look at verse 18. Here the angel tells John that the woman represents “the great city” that rules over the kings of the earth (cf. 16:19). We’ll see this great city mentioned four more times in the next chapter (18:10,18,19, 21). Apostle Peter referred to the city of Rome as “Babylon” (1Pe5:13). But this isn’t just predicting the fall of the city of Rome, but the fall of all the powerful worldly cities in history that oppose God.

Read 18:1–3. In contrast to the city that gave light to the world, the angel came from heaven with great authority and illuminated the world with his splendor—far superior to the splendor of any earthly city. He again predicts the fall of Babylon. It’s another fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Isa13:21–22). In one sense it refers to the fall of the Roman Empire. But it also predicts the fall of the entire world order that’s opposed to God and to Christ. Verse 3 especially emphasizes the spiritual dangers of its pleasures and materialism.

Read verse 4. This is actually a quote from the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa48:20; 52:11; Jer50:8; 51:6,9,45). Apostle Paul also quotes it to believers living in the rich and corrupted city of Corinth: “Therefore, ‘Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you’” (2Co6:17). “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins…” (18:4) As God’s people, we have to live in this godless, sinful world. But our Lord Jesus didn’t pray for us to leave the world, but for us to be not “of the world”—meaning to be sanctified (Jn17:14­–18). He taught us to be salt and light in the world (Mt5:13–16)—meaning to be a good influence amidst the world’s sin and all its darkness. To be salt and light, we’ve got to be clear about not compromising with the world’s sinful pleasures and all its materialism. The battle is not really from without, but from within. 1 Peter 2:11 says, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your souls.”

Read verses 5–7a. It again tells us that God will punish the world for all its injustice. Read verse 7b. This is another prophecy of Isaiah being fulfilled (Isa47:7,8). Basically, it tells us of the arrogance of this woman. It’s the spirit of this world, which tells people they can be self-sufficient with their wealth and evil deeds, and that nothing will ever happen to them. This was exactly the same reason the Risen Christ rebuked the church at Laodicea: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing’” (Rev3:17). Read verse 8. God has no problem destroying any such proud person or nation. What should we learn from this? 1 Peter 5:5b,6 reads: “‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.”

In the next section of chapter 18 we see how kings, merchants and mariners all mourned because of the fall of Babylon. The kings seem most responsible—it says they committed adultery with her and shared her luxury. The merchants gained their wealth from her. The mariners also became rich through her wealth. They all will “weep and mourn” over her (9,11,15,19; cf. Ez27:31). They will stand far off, terrified at her torment (10,15,17). Verses 11–13 especially list what business the merchants will lose. It starts with the most valuable thing to them—gold—and gradually decreases to what is least valuable to them—human slaves. This shows the inverted value system of the godless world, where money is more important than helpless people. This is what greed for luxury turns us into—people who value material things more than human beings. Read verse 14. This tells us that God does want us to long not for worldly luxury and splendor, but for his kingdom.

Read verse 20. In contrast to those who enjoyed the luxuries and pleasures of the prostitute, then wept and mourned, God wants his people to rejoice at the fall of such a godless, corrupt world. We can rejoice only if we’ve repented from our hearts of enjoying material luxuries and pleasures at the expense of suffering people.

Look at verse 21. This vision of a large millstone thrown into the sea reminds us of Jesus’ words about causing others to sin (Mt18:6), which is exactly what this woman did. In verses 22,23 all the joys of life that this great city had experienced will be over forever. Why? Verse 23b says it’s because “By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.” And there’s another reason. Read verse 24. Again, Revelation is telling us that God will bring justice for all his precious people who suffered and shed his blood for Jesus’ sake.

Then in chapter 19 the scene dramatically changes. Read 19:1–3. This is a great multitude in heaven. They praise God for bringing his justice on the great prostitute who corrupted the world. In verse 4 the 24 elders and four living creatures join in the worship and praise God. Read verse 5. Not just the heavenly multitude and creatures, God wants us all—great and small—to be praising him for his victory over this corrupt world.

Then there’s a totally different praise and worship session, and a totally different lady—instead of a prostitute, she’s a bride. Read verses 6–8. Here, “the bride” is the church (2Co11:2; Eph5:25–27). This beautiful bride is getting married to the Lamb, Jesus. We’re going to see more about her in chapters 21 and 22. But this metaphor of God’s people being like a bride and God like our Husband is throughout the Bible (Isa54:4–6; 62:5; Hos2:19,20; Mt9:5; 25:1ff.). It’s stunning that heaven is described as the most amazing wedding supper. This, too, fulfills Isaiah’s prophecy: “On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken” (Isa25:6–8).

Read verse 8. Even though we’re so weak and poor, God will give us beautiful wedding clothes for this glorious event. We can wash our robes and make them a beautiful white in the blood of the Lamb (7:13,14). We can be ready for this event, ready to meet our Bridegroom Jesus, when we repent and clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ (Ro13:13,14). The wedding clothes are the clothes of his grace, which we need to humbly accept (Mt22:11,12). When we accept the blood of Jesus by faith and clothe ourselves with him and his grace, that’s when we can start doing the righteous acts of his holy people. What a contrast to the filth of the prostitute!

Read verse 9. This is the most blessed wedding invitation we’ll ever get. The imagery tells us we should get excited about being invited to heaven. So many people don’t realize what an amazing privilege it is and ignore the invitation (Mt22:1–14). But we receive this invitation only by God’s amazing grace. Though we’re sinful, Jesus stands at the door of our hearts and knocks, waiting for us to let him in, so that we can eat together, sharing fellowship now, and forever in heaven (Rev3:20). Real blessing is not having power and worldly luxuries, but accepting the invitation to the wedding supper of the Lamb.

So what’s the point of these visions of the prostitute and the bride? We shouldn’t allow ourselves to be influenced by the materialism and pleasures of the world. How can we? We need the hope to be at the wedding supper of the Lamb. With this hope in our hearts, we can resist the temptations of this world. May God renew in us the living hope to meet Jesus our Bridegroom and share in his glorious wedding feast in heaven. May God give us keen spiritual discernment to see through the glories of this world and be like salt and light by being close to Jesus.