

The End of Empire

Revelation 17-19

About a year ago, *someone* convinced our teaching team it would be a good idea to do a year-long deep-dive into the *Book of Revelation*. I know there've been varied responses to this series—some appreciating the new clarity and insight into some of the Bible's most confusing chapters; others struggling to see the value in such strange and heavy content. Admittedly, it's been intense; but the reason we chose this book—*why John wrote it in the first place*—wasn't to scare us or draw us into theological debates. Revelation's aim is to inspire full-devotion to Jesus—to push us beyond the tame and tepid versions of Jesus we often live with, to see Jesus for who he really is; to help us see that the sometimes-strange realities of heaven are actually more *real* than the so-called *reality* we see all around us. Climbing into John's wild imagination and bizarre visions reminds us that our senses can be misleading. John intentionally disorients us at times, in order to re-orient us to God's perspective, turning *our* world upside-down so we can begin to see the upside-down kingdom of God as truly right-side up. It's a *revelation*—a brand new way of seeing our world, ourselves, and ultimately Jesus—all designed so that, by seeing Jesus like never before, we might love, worship, and follow Jesus like never before.

Revelation begins with the risen and exalted Jesus leading the church into victory over the world's powers. They conquer by following the self-sacrificing way of Jesus, revealed as a slain Lamb. In the middle section, John's sci-fi imagery pulls back the curtain on the *real* cosmic battle, as evil—*personified as dragons and beasts*—wages war for our worship and allegiance. The visions aren't meant to instill *fear*, but *faith*; that if we *suffer and die* with Jesus, we will be *raised to rule* with him for eternity. Now, in its final chapters, hope takes centerstage, as John reveals not just what *was*, or what *is*, but what *is to come*. And spoiler alert: *it's good news!*

This good news begins in chapters 17-19 with the Fall of Babylon—the *End of Empire*. Chapters 17 & 19 describe the slaying of the beast from 2 perspectives and, wedged between them, chapter 18 reveals the big question John wants *us* to wrestle with.

Chapter 17 opens with a vision of a female figure riding the evil dragon from chapter 12. John clarifies this isn't an *actual* woman; it's *Rome*, depicted as the goddess, *Roma*—the Empire personified, like *Lady Liberty* in America. But John calls her, *The Great Prostitute*. I wish he'd used a less problematic metaphor; unfortunately, this was a very common way of referring to *idolatry* in the Bible; committing *spiritual* adultery by worshiping other so-called gods. John says Rome's partnership with the Dragon had turned it into a kind of spiritual *brothel*, luring people away from God and enticing them to sell their souls for power, pleasure, wealth, and security.

“The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand.” (Revelation 17:4)

Her outfit reflects Rome's economic strength, but also matches the description of the ceremonial garments worn by Israel's priests in [Exodus 28](#), right down to the colours, jewelry, and even the gold cup. Priests also wore a gold-plated turban engraved with the words, **“Holy to the Lord”** on the forehead. The woman also has an inscription on her forehead, but it reads:

“BABYLON THE GREAT—THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Rev 17:5)

John depicts Empire as, not just a spiritual *prostitute*, but a *parody* of the *priesthood*. But unlike Israel's priests, this pseudo-priestess doesn't *mediate* sins; she *multiplies* them, leading the whole world in rebellion and sin. She calls herself *Babylon*, after the Bible's oldest Empire and organized rebellion against God; the idolatry capital of the world—the *original* Sin City.

Puzzled by what he sees, an angel offers John an explanation that's even more confusing than the original vision, but one thing is perfectly clear about the Empire and her allies:

“They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.” (Rev 17:13-14)

Despite their powerful alliance, the Lamb—with *his followers*—is victorious, proving to be the world’s true ruler. But victory isn’t won in *battle*; instead, in their hatred, the powers turn in on each other and self-destruct. Empire’s downfall comes from within, imploding as her own allies, **“...bring her to ruin; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire.” (Revelation 17:16)**

This graphic scene is then replayed in chapter 19 in greater detail and from a different camera angle, this time focusing on *Jesus*, who rides in on a white horse and is called, **“Faithful and True” (19:11)** in contrast to the *unfaithful*-prostitute and *false*-priestess. And just like her pseudo-priestly garments, Jesus’ battle-robos are also red, but for a very different reason:

“He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood...” (Revelation 19:13)

Some have mistakenly seen Jesus’ blood-stained robes as proof of a final bloody conflict; *The Battle of Armageddon*. But notice, Jesus arrives already drenched in blood, before the battle begins. This is not his *enemies’* blood—it’s *his own*. The Battle of Armageddon *never happens* because Jesus has already spilled his blood in a decisive victory over Empire *at the cross*.

Jesus and the priestess not only wear matching red robes; he too bears an inscription:

“On his thigh, he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16)

The inscription on the woman’s *forehead* exposed her as a false-priestess; but Jesus’ inscription is on his *thigh*, the place you’d expect a warrior to keep their sword. In other words, he’s armed with nothing but his *name*—the name above all names that, in chapter 17, revealed Jesus as the world’s one true ruler, the one before whom kings and empires must one day bow.

The sword he *does* have, is **“coming out of his mouth.” (Rev 19:15)** an image John used back in chapter 1, imported from a prophecy in the Book of Isaiah, promising justice to victims

of exploitation—not through *violence*, but with a righteous *verdict*; evil overruled. What we’re meant to see here is that, how Jesus wins his enemies is with *truth*, not *tanks*; with *wisdom*, not *warships*; not with missiles and guns, but with the message of the gospel—the *good news*.

Chapter 19 ends the same way as chapter 17. The same evil alliance that destroyed itself with fire and flesh-eating hatred implodes again. Here, their flesh is eaten by birds and they’re burned away in a lake of fire. The flesh-eating birds are from an obscure story in the *Ezekiel*, where a mysterious military alliance declares war on God’s people. God warns them that, like Babylon, **“you will fall, you and all your troops and the nations with you. I will give you as food to all kinds of carrion birds.”** (Ezekiel 39:4) But just as a bloody battle seems inevitable, God instructs Israel not to fight and no battle occurs. Instead, the enemies’ weapons fall out of their hands and the army is annihilated. God then invites all Israel into a massive seven-year clean-up project, cleansing the land with fire, scrubbing all evidence of this mysterious Empire’s existence from the earth. And there’s a super cool little detail in *Ezekiel 39:9*. God says:

“Israel will go out and use the weapons for fuel and burn them up; the small and large shields, the bows and arrows, the war clubs and spears. For seven years they will use them for fuel.”

It’s a minor little detail, but a major theological statement. God doesn’t use the weapons of Empire to destroy it; God destroys the weapons of Empire to cleanse the world and heal it. This is the idea John is tapping into as he describes the fall of Babylon/Rome/Empire.

Now, the historical Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians in 539 BCE, 600-plus years before Revelation was written. Isaiah the prophet spoke of the event, describing how Israel’s lookout reported enthusiastically, **“*Babylon has fallen, has fallen!*”** (Isaiah 21:9) After years of Babylonian captivity, this doubly-emphasized exclamation would’ve come as very, very good news. God’s people were finally free from the tyranny of Empire! So, in chapter 18, John echoes:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!” She has become a dwelling for demons... ..the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed [idolatry] with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.” (Rev 18:2-3)

Like ancient Babylon, Rome in its day embodied the spirit of Empire, of rebellion and revelry, luring the world into its grip with its wealth and opulence; what John calls, ***“excessive luxuries,”*** the *true* cost of which is revealed in an itemized list of its primary economic imports:

“...cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth... ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble... cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and [topping the list] human beings sold as slaves.” (Revelation 18:12-13)

The shock is *intentional*. The true cost of the unrestrained pursuit of power, pleasure and wealth isn't economic; it's existential. *People* bought and sold, traded as *commodities*; trafficked as *cargo*—treated as *items*, not as *images* of the Creator. Slavery is the ultimate affront to God.

According to International Justice Mission, more than 50 million people worldwide are currently living in slavery, from forced labour to forced marriages, to those trafficked for sexual exploitation, mostly women or children. And slavery is big business, generating over \$324 billion (*with a B*) in annual revenue. It's easy to dismiss this as a far-away problem, disconnected from our daily lives, but slavery drives the global production of everything from tobacco, coffee, rice, sugar, and chocolate, to the materials and manufacturing of our clothing to the mining of metals for our electronics—*cell phones, laptops, EVs*—not to mention online content. More than ever, the luxuries we enjoy are the product of *slavery*—human lives traded to satisfy our lust for the latest technology and lowest prices on luxury items. Governments like ours turn a blind-eye to human rights violations to maintain global trade-partnerships and keep the economy rolling, so we won't have to sacrifice our standard of living for their well-being. This is the *true* cost of our *excessive luxuries*. And John says it's the reason God is so committed to bringing down Empire.

So, what about us? What do we do? Well, John's answer comes in a quote (*hopefully not surprising by now*) from the Old Testament, from a prophet who lived through Babylon's original fall. Quoting Jeremiah, John writes, **"Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues."** (Rev 18:4). In Jeremiah's version, he literally shouts, **"Run for your lives!"** (Jer 51:45) This is not a test; it's an emergency—a warning to separate ourselves from a society built on oppression, a culture that values *luxury* over *lives*, personal *wealth* over human *worth*—to avoid her *crimes* in order to avoid their *consequences*, which Jeremiah says will be like having a *millstone* tied around your neck and being thrown into the sea; an image Jesus used to describe the fate of all who prey on the vulnerable. John writes:

"A mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said... 'The great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again. The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters, will never be heard in you again. No worker of any trade will ever be found in you again... The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's important people. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.'" (Rev 18:21-23)

The Greek word translated *magic spell* is *pharmakeia* (like, *pharmacy*); it's the ancient word for *drugs*. John accuses Empire of drugging us—*intoxicating us with luxury*—and dragging us into sin. Thankfully though, Empire falls, *never to rise again*. You can bet that, for victims of its so-called *important people*, it's the *ultimate* good news! *But not everyone sees it that way*.

"When the kings of the earth who committed [idolatry] with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore." (Revelation 18:9-11)

This *good* news of Empire's demise spells *disaster* for all who benefit from it, who enjoy its luxuries and profit from its economic model of systemic violence and oppression. And you have to wonder, given the increasing instability in our world, the volatility and vulnerability of the economic systems and political structures on which our luxurious lifestyles depend, how

would the fall of Empire affect *us*? How might its demise impact our bank accounts and bottom-lines, our standard of living? The End of Empire is presented as *good* news, but will it be for *us*? That's the question John wants us to wrestle with, to evaluate our attachment and addiction to Empire. Because, in contrast to the mourning merchants, he envisions a very different response:

“Rejoice over her, you heavens! Rejoice, you people of God! Rejoice, apostles and prophets! For God has judged her with the judgment she imposed on you.” (Revelation 18:20)

While the thought of God's judgment may frighten *us*, for those exploited and abused by Empire, God judgment of evil brings justice and joy—cause for celebration, as the *woes* once pronounced against Babylon are re-written as *worship* lyrics, hallelujahs sung by heavenly choirs to celebrate Empire's eternal ruin and God's everlasting reign. If this is uncomfortable for us, it's likely because we haven't been oppressed, forced to live on the under-side of Empire's tyranny.

Think of the images we sometimes see on the news of newly freed citizens dancing in the streets after the toppling of a corrupt regime. Sadly, those celebrations are too-often short-lived, but John is describing the full and final annihilation of *all* Empire, *never to rise again*. This is capital-G *good* news! Jesus came to bring this kind of good news to the *poor*, freedom to *captives*, comfort to mourners, healing to the *sick*; not to hand out spiritual bonuses to already wealthy and successful people whose addiction to excessive luxury destroys the planet and dehumanizes the most vulnerable. The final judgment of Jesus is all about, ***“destroying those who destroy the earth”*** (11:18), cleansing the world of evil and renewing God's good creation, restoring our humanity, until (in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien) *everything sad comes untrue*.

The End of Empire is truly *good news*. But if it triggers more *worry* than *worship* in us, more *panic* more than *praise*, we would be wise to reflect on our position of privilege. Does the wealth, comfort, and security Empire provides keep us from fully aligning with Jesus by standing

with the suffering, content to live blissfully unaware of how *slavery* funds what's in our closets, cupboards, investment portfolios, and all-inclusive vacation packages? Do Empire's wars waged on the other side of the planet leave us thinking of the price of gas for us here? Does increased home equity in Niagara feel disconnected from the labourers, forced to leave their families in the Caribbean to do the work that makes this a popular wine region and tourist destination, while they live in substandard conditions without the healthcare we prize as Canadians? Are we so intoxicated and addicted to Empire's excessive luxuries that we couldn't break free if we wanted to? If so, Jeremiah through John is telling us to *run for our lives!*

Practically speaking, how do we actually do that? Well, I'd like to suggest that, before we *run*, we first learn to walk, and start by taking 3 small but significant *baby-steps*:

Baby step #1 is **awareness**. This week, take stock of what's in your closet, pantry, or stock portfolio, and research the ethical practices of the companies you support. Choose one item you consume regularly—*coffee, chocolate, makeup, ion-lithium batteries, local produce*—and explore more ethical options. www.fairtrade.net might be a good place to start. For my part, I've switched my at-home *coffee* to a certified Fair-Trade brand, as it's something I use every day. I'm not expecting it'll change the world, but it's one step toward changing me.

Baby-step #2 is **abstinence**. As a step of disconnecting from Empire, choose one luxury to deny yourself—*a trip, reno, vehicle or tech upgrade*, to retrain your consumption habits and resist the values of Empire. Last night, Sarah-Jade wrote the final exam of her undergrad. In the fall, she'll go to teacher's college, and needs a laptop. I'd had this in mind as a graduation gift but, in writing this talk, learned of the ethical benefits of buying *refurbished* computers, so I got her a *used* laptop instead. It won't change the world, but it's a mindset change for us.

Baby-step #3 is taking **action**—finding one practical way to align ourselves with the poor and powerless. You could learn more about International Justice Mission’s work to free victims of human trafficking at www.ijm.com or even donate to their work. I was able to donate what I saved by buying a *used* laptop! Locally, we can all take action by serving in one of our Southridge anchor causes—serving food and friendship to the hungry and lonely, befriending the currently or recently homeless, inviting migrant workers into our social circle, or becoming a good relative to Indigenous Peoples— all profound acts of resistance against the intoxicating pull of Empire.

As the band comes to lead us in a song of response, today’s text may still feel very *heavy*. But thankfully, John doesn’t leave us there. In the final *hallelujah* of Revelation 19, he writes:

“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.) Then the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” (Revelation 19:7-9)

In contrast to the woman we met earlier, a very different female figure now emerges: a bride in a wedding gown, representing the church clothed in good deeds. Notice, this gown of good deeds is a *gift* from the *groom*. This isn’t a vision of a church of perfect people, but of ordinary people like us, with all our flaws and imperfections, wearing garments of *grace* that glow with *good works*—redeemed from the grip of Empire and *ready* to be united with Christ.

The Empire is going down; the question is, are we so intoxicated with its luxuries, we’ll go down with it? Will we feast on excessive luxury now, or join the wedding supper of the Lamb forever? Stand united with Empire in this life, or make ourselves ready to be united as a bride with Christ for eternity? The good news today is that the days of Empire are ending and the Lamb’s wedding invitations are being written. The question is, are we making ourselves *ready*?