

In Revelation 17, we meet a woman on whose forehead is written a name—“Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth.” From there through the end of the book, Revelation deals with two different entities: One is the city of Babylon, the enemy of God’s people. The other is the city of Jerusalem, which is the people of God. All of humanity is divided between these two cities. There is no third option: you belong to one or the other. (This division shouldn’t surprise us because ever since the gospel was first preached, there were only two camps: people belong either to the offspring of the serpent or to the offspring of the woman.)

Revelation ends with God’s people rejoicing over two things: the sudden destruction of Babylon and the sudden arrival of the New Jerusalem. Listen to a bit of what we hear in Revelation 18:

Woe, woe, the great city, where all those who have ships on the sea became rich from her wealth;

for in a single hour she was destroyed.

Rejoice over her, heaven, and you saints, apostles, and prophets,
because God has pronounced on her the judgment she passed on you!

Then a mighty angel picked up a stone like a large millstone and threw it into the sea, saying,
In this way, Babylon the great city will be thrown down violently and never be found again.ⁱ

And when the people of God see the judgment of Babylon and her citizens, this is their response:

Hallelujah! Salvation, glory, and power belong to our God,
because his judgments are true and righteous,
because he has judged the notorious prostitute
who corrupted the earth with her sexual immorality;
and he has avenged the blood of his servants that was on her hands.

A second time they said,

Hallelujah! Her smoke ascends forever and ever!

Hallelujah, because our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns!

Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory,
because the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has prepared herself.ⁱⁱ

Revelation ends—and the Bible concludes—with two stark and simultaneous realities: the eternal salvation of God’s people and the eternal destruction of God’s enemies. That is where

Isaiah ends (verses 22-24), reminding us that there are only two destinations—eternal life or eternal death.

“For just as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, will remain before me”—

this is the LORD’s declaration—“so your offspring and your name will remain.

All humanity will come to worship me from one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another,” says the LORD.

“As they leave, they will see the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against me; for their worm will never die, their fire will never go out, and they will be a horror to all humanity.”

The salvation God spoke of was not the renovation of some middle eastern real estate. The Lord promised new heavens and a new earth, which will remain forever. The offspring of Israel—which will be made up of all those who believe—will worship God without ceasing.

Outside the earthly Jerusalem, there was a garbage dump that burned continually. In the same way, outside the New Jerusalem, there will be a place of fire where those who rebelled against God will burn forever. That’s what makes this chapter and Isaiah’s message so urgent—the end is forever—ecstasy or agony. We cannot afford to belong to the wrong city.

Isaiah’s message would have special meaning after Babylon invaded Judah, destroyed the temple, and carried them into exile. He promised deliverance from Babylon and a return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. But Isaiah reminds Israel (and us) that being a true Israelite or true Babylonian is *not* a matter of mere externals—it’s a matter of how the heart responds to God. In fact, we will see citizens of the true Jerusalem and citizens of wicked Babylon can (for a time) co-exist in the same city, even in the same house of worship.

In verses 1-2, Isaiah drives home the point that the Lord cannot be confined to an earthly location, not even the temple: “Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. Where could you possibly build a house for me? And where would my resting place be? My hand made all these things, and so they all came into being.” Only a fool would believe the temple held the Lord. It was a meeting place for God and his people. But nothing in creation is sufficient to house God. That should remind Israel (and us) that being true worshipers goes far beyond externals.

Rebuilding the temple was important. But Isaiah “was painfully aware of the capacity of human beings to misuse it; to focus on the temple itself instead of the God of the temple, to corrupt it with perfunctory and impure worship. Isaiah understood very well that physical restoration was not enough. Unless there was spiritual renewal the future would simply repeat the sins of the past.”ⁱⁱⁱ Co-existing in Jerusalem and the temple were both true and counterfeit worshipers.

In verse 2, the Lord declares, “I will look favorably upon this kind of person: one who is humble, submissive in spirit, and trembles at my word.” The Lord approves of the “humble” worshiper—that is, one who takes the lowest place. He approves of the worshiper who is

“submissive (or contrite) in spirit”—“one who is conscious of sin and weakness in the presence of God.”^{iv} The Lord approves of the worshiper who “trembles at his word”—that is, one who is willing to trust and obey God’s word “however painful it might be.”^v True worship is a matter of the heart: humbling yourself before the Lord because you know your sin and your need, trembling before his word as your only source of hope—a posture of faith that looks to God alone for mercy.

In verse 3, the Lord describes the worship that he hates. It’s a striking description:

One person slaughters an ox, another kills a person;
one person sacrifices a lamb, another breaks a dog’s neck;
one person offers a grain offering, another offers pig’s blood;
one person offers incense, another praises an idol—

Each line begins with a person performing an orthodox act—a sacrifice commanded in the Law. It’s followed by another person performing an abomination, something utterly forbidden by the Law—in this case, sacrificing human beings, dogs, and pigs to idols.

Verses 4-6 give us a clearer description of what’s going on here. In verse 4, the Lord says he will punish them because “I called and no one answered; I spoke and they did not listen.” They would not heed his call to repent and believe. He will punish them because “they did what was evil in my sight and chose what I did not delight in.” They chose their own ways with arrogant, proud, scoffing hearts instead of humbling, trembling before his word.

In verse 5, the Lord will punish them for persecuting believers in the Lord’s name. He speaks to those who tremble at his word—“hear the word of the LORD: ‘Your brothers who hate and exclude you for my name’s sake have said, “Let the LORD be glorified so that we can see your joy!” But they will be put to shame.’” Externally, they appeared to be part of God’s people, even speaking words of religious piety. But inwardly, they hated those who receive God’s word in humble faith—and they wanted to exclude them. They used their skill with religious language to set up standards that preserved their position and power over others. Their self-righteous obsession with the externals produced in their hearts “partisanship and power struggles, theological hatred and religious persecution.”^{vi}

All these condemnations refer to the worshipers back in verse 3. Notice the shocking way the Lord condemns them—“all these have chosen their ways and delight in their abhorrent practices.” “All these”—each of these eight individual worshipers receives the same assessment. They have “chosen their own ways” (over God’s ways), and they “delight in their abhorrent practices.” The Lord calls slaughtering an ox, sacrificing a lamb, offering a grain or incense offering (all things commanded in the Law!) “abhorrent”—*God hates them*.

In Verse 17, the Lord speaks of “those who dedicate and purify themselves to enter the groves following their leader, eating meat from pigs, vermin, and rats, will perish together.” He’s describing pagan fertility rituals, the worship of idols. But notice they receive the same condemnation and punishment as those who sacrifice lambs in the temple with proud hearts.

What's going on here? The Lord is illustrating that the Israelites can externally conform to orthodox worship and be rejected by him because they are counterfeit worshipers. They draw near to the Lord through their external worship, but their hearts are far from him. When it comes to being acceptable to God, they may as well be sacrificing humans, dogs, and pigs to idols.

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee was standing and praying like this about himself: 'God, I thank you that I'm not like other people—greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth, of everything I get.'

"But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes to heaven but kept striking his chest and saying, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!' I tell you, this one went down to his house justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."^{vii}

On the last day, there will be many who point to their lives of external orthodoxy—they knew how to interpret scripture, held the right doctrines, exposed error, and attended a church that had biblical preaching and practice. But, because they did it all with proud hearts, gloating in their own rightness, and looking down their noses at all the churches and Christians getting it wrong, Jesus will say to them, "Go away. I never knew you." If orthodoxy is not the overflow of humble faith in God's word, then in terms of being acceptable to God, it's no better than pagan sacrifices.

Where's your heart this morning? Do you sit here knowing yourself to be the chief of sinners, aware of your insufficiency before God, trembling before the glorious word of the gospel? Or do you sit with an orthodox posture masking an internal life of pride and self-righteous hypocrisy?

How we answer that question matters because counterfeit worshipers will be punished by God forever. In verse 4, the Lord says, "So I will choose their punishment, and I will bring on them what they dread." What they dread is destruction, poverty, and death. That's why they use religion as they do. They cover their bases in orthodoxy, hoping to prevent God from condemning them. But their hearts don't love God. They use their skill with scripture to persecute and exclude true believers. So the Lord will give them what they dread: seeking to avoid death, they will die.

In verse 6, we hear, "A sound of uproar from the city! A voice from the temple—the voice of the LORD, paying back his enemies what they deserve!" God will speak from his temple—and his voice will give them not only what they dread but what they deserve. The punishment will fit the crime. And this time, the punishment will not be carried out by the armies of Assyria or Babylon. In verses 15-17, we see the Lord himself will execute judgment. A fury of fire will be their death—a death in which their worm never dies and their flame never extinguishes.

But such is not the case for the people of God. True worshipers will be relieved of the curse to flourish in eternal joy and comfort. In verses 7-8, the Lord describes a sudden, pain-free birth. Before pregnant Jerusalem feels a single pang, the labor and delivery are over. (In the curse, the pain of childbirth was increased. In this birth, the curse is gone!) This birth is the sudden deliverance of God's people, the birth of God's new people. This is what God would do in a moment on the cross of Christ, and through his resurrection—the Kingdom of God would arrive and overtake the world.

But to those who had suffered for decades, waiting in Babylon, this promise might sound too good to be true. The long waiting and suffering may have caused them to doubt God's faithfulness. Perhaps God would bring them to the brink of deliverance and forsake them. So God assures them. "'Will I bring a baby to the point of birth and not deliver it?' says the LORD; 'or will I who deliver, close the womb?' says your God." History has proven he will not forsake his people. He didn't leave Israel in slavery. He didn't leave Judah in Babylon. He didn't leave the Messiah in the tomb. And he will not forsake anyone who hopes in Jesus Christ but will raise them all up on the last day.

Verses 10-13 tell us we can start our rejoicing now because God keeps his promises. The future of Jerusalem is like a nursing child at its mother's breast, where there is no chance of the milk running dry. They may drink deeply and find delight in God's free-flowing comfort. Peace and wealth will flow to them forever. They will be as happy as a baby bouncing on its mother's lap.

Verse 14 brings us back to the stark urgency of the matter. There are only two options: those who respond to God's word in humility will see, rejoice and flourish in the Lord's power, but those who reject his word will receive wrath. True worshipers flourish forever, but false worshipers perish forever. So, who is a true worshiper?

Verses 18-21 tell us that true worshipers are those who come to Jesus Christ. True worshipers are not restricted to ethnic Israelites—the invitation is open to all. True worshipers are those gathered by the Lord to see his glory. What does it mean to see the glory of God? It means to see the "sign" in verse 19. The Lord "will establish a sign"—and he will send his people to the nations that have not heard about the Lord or seen his glory. These sent-ones will "proclaim [his] glory among the nations." That "sign" is the glory of God which someone must see and rejoice in to be a true worshiper. In verse 20, we find that those who respond to this sign in faith become members of God's family and priests to God—true worshipers.

What is the "sign"? Isaiah 11:10-11 says, "On that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will look to him for guidance, and his resting place will be glorious." The sign is Jesus—the virgin-born Immanuel, God with Us. Jesus said this of himself in John 12:32-33: "'As for me, if I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate what kind of death he was about to die." The crucifixion of Jesus—the sinless Son of God dying under God's wrath for the sins of his people—is a sign of salvation to

all the nations of the earth. Those who look to this crucified and risen Savior and believe in him will be forgiven of their sins and raised to eternal life. Are you resting all your hope on Jesus Christ the Lord?

And the proclamation of that sign is what is happening today around the globe, from those sent to the Middle East to this sermon right now. Verse 19 says that God is sending “survivors”—those who have escaped his wrath through trusting his promises—to tell others about Jesus. This is dangerous work. Isaiah mentions one nation known for its archers—likely indicating its powerful army. God sends his messengers into hostile territory so that his enemies might become his sons through faith. It's dangerous work, but it is necessary work, for Paul tells us in Romans 10 that everyone who believes in Jesus as the Lord who died and rose again will be saved. But, he reminds us that they cannot call on him if they have not believed in him. They can't believe in him without hearing about him. They cannot hear about him unless someone proclaims him. No one will proclaim him unless they are sent. So, we have a responsibility as “survivors” through Christ to go and send people to hold up the sign, to preach that Jesus Christ died for our sins, rose from the dead, and offers salvation to all who believe.

One day, this will be the final scene: There will be a magnificent resurrection of every human being that ever lived. They will be divided into two people—Jerusalem and Babylon. All those who belong to Babylon, including counterfeit worshipers, will be thrown with her into the lake of fire, the second death. But all of God's people, the true worshipers, will be gathered to God to live forever before him on the new earth. And as the redeemed walk outside the New Jerusalem, they will look into the lake of fire and see the dead bodies of those who rebelled against God—“their worm will never die, their fire will never go out, and they will be a horror to all humanity.”

And as those true worshipers see the final state of the rebels, they will shudder in gratitude, remembering that this is the punishment they deserved for all their rebellion against the Lord. Then they will turn and see in their midst a Lamb standing as though he had been slain. This King, who walks beside them, will take them by the hand to guide them—and they will see that his hand is scarred by the worm and by the fire, by the nail holes of the cross. They will look from the hand into the loving face of that King and stand amazed in the presence of Jesus who endured the wrath of God on the cross for them—and they will worship him forever. Will you be among them?

ⁱ Revelation 18:19-21 (CSB)

ⁱⁱ Revelation 19:6–8 (CSB)

ⁱⁱⁱ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings*, 246–247.

^{iv} Bob Fyall, “Isaiah,” in *Isaiah–Ezekiel*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 411.

^v Bob Fyall, “Isaiah,” in *Isaiah–Ezekiel*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 411.

^{vi} Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings*

^{vii} Luke 18:9–14 (CSB)