

Revelation 17:15–18

The False Religion Destruction.

God's Purpose Through the Beast's Hand

THE SEVEN BOWL JUDGEMENTS

Revelation 17:15 | The Waters Explained

Then he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."

Revelation 17:16 | The Beast and Ten Kings Turn on the Harlot

"And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire."

Revelation 17:17 | God's Sovereign Purpose

"For God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled."

Revelation 17:18 | The Woman Identified

"And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth."

Introduction:

Some people think God is good but are afraid to believe in God's power.

In the book of **Ruth**, Naomi did not doubt God's power, but she forgot His goodness, and lamented.

Ruth 1:20-21, *But she said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. ²¹ I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?"*

600 years before Christ, Jewish exiles in Babylon lamented the destruction of Jerusalem.

Psalms 137:1-4, *By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept When we remembered Zion. ² We hung our harps Upon the willows in the midst of it. ³ For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, And those who plundered us requested mirth, Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴ How shall we sing the Lord's song In a foreign land?*

They prayed to God to avenge what Babylon had done to Jerusalem.

In the early church, where was God when Christians prayed for Him to save them from persecution under the Caesars of the Roman Empire?

Where was God when Rome spilled even more blood in the name of Christ?

Where was God when Rome confused the Gospel, hid the Bible under layers of allegory and superstition, and for centuries, kept millions of souls from hearing and believing the Gospel?

Why does God let the wicked prosper?

Why does God let sinners get away with sin?

Why did God let this woman, Babylon, become so great?

Where are We?

The angel's interpretation reaches its climax.

V 9–14 revealed the beast, his seven heads, his ten kings, and the Lamb's victory. But the fate of the woman who rides the beast remained open.

V 15–18 complete the picture and answer three questions hovering since **V 1**.

- Who are the peoples supporting the harlot?
- What happens to her in the end?
- Who exactly is she?

These verses also reveal one of the most striking theological realities in all of prophetic Scripture: **God uses His enemies to execute His judgement.**

Structure	Content
V 1–2	The angel's invitation to see the judgment of the harlot.
V 3–6	The vision: woman, beast, cup, name, and drunkenness.
V 7–8	The beast's three-tense identity explained.
V 9–14	Seven heads and ten horns explained. The Lamb's victory.
V 15–18 — THIS PASSAGE	The waters explained. The beast destroys the harlot. God's purpose fulfilled.

♦ The Scorpion and the Frog

A scorpion asks a frog to carry it across a river. The frog hesitates: "You will sting me."

The scorpion replies: "That would be irrational — we would both drown."

Halfway across, the scorpion stings the frog.

As they sink, the frog asks: "Why?"

The scorpion answers: "It is my nature."

The beast carries the harlot using her influence to consolidate power. But the beast's nature is not service. It is domination.

The very hands that carried her become the hands that tear her apart. The alliance was never a partnership. It was a platform. God knew this. He planned it. **V 17** says so.

Revelation 17:15 — The Waters: The Harlot's Global Reach

The Explanation of the Waters

In **V 1**, the angel said the harlot sits upon *many waters*.

V 15, *Then he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."*

The angel explains something John had seen:

- 1) the waters that you saw (**15**),
- 2) the ten horns that you saw (**16**),
- 3) the woman that you saw (**18**).

Each time, the angel adds an explanation we discover the hand of God at work in ways we would not have expected.

Jeremiah 51:13, *O you who dwell by many waters, Abundant in treasures, Your end has come, The measure of your covetousness.*

Evoking commerce, power, and the crossing-point of the ancient world. The angel now interprets what **V 1** left open: ***the waters are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.***

This fourfold formula appears **seven times in Revelation (7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15; 19:6)**. It is the full scope of humanity every ethnic, linguistic, and political group. **The harlot is not a regional influence. She is a global system.**

- The Harlot is the False/one world religion.
- The Beast is the Antichrist.

The waters are not geography — they are humanity. Every nation, every tongue, every people has been shaped by the system she represents. She sits enthroned over the whole of human civilisation.

What does the Harlot represent?

Feature (Revelation 17)	Significance
Purple, scarlet, gold, jewels (V 4)	Wealth and corrupted splendour — the allure of a world-system built on materialism.
Cup full of abominations (V 4)	Spiritual corruption exported globally — idolatry, false religion, moral pollution.
Drunk with blood of saints (V 6)	Persecution of God's people as a feature, not a side-effect.

Sits on many waters (V 41 & 15)	Global reach — no nation untouched by her influence.
Mother of harlots (V 5)	She is the source from which all such corrupted systems descend.

Her global dominion is the measure of her power and of her coming judgement. She sits enthroned overall. She will fall before all.

Revelation 17:16 — The Beast Turns: The Harlot Destroyed

The Coalition That Devours Its Own Patron

V 16 is one of the most startling reversals in Scripture. The ten kings who in **V 13** gave their power to the beast.

Now they are turned against the harlot they once served.

Revelation 17:16, *"And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire."*

Four verbs describe her destruction with escalating violence:

Verb	Action	OT Echo	Significance
Hate	Total reversal of coalition's posture	Ezekiel 16:37	What was used is now despised.

Desolate & naked	Strip her of wealth and status	Ezekiel 16:39	Public shame — power displayed becomes power removed.
Eat her flesh	Consume her resources and institutions	Micah 3:3	Not a political defeat but a devouring.
Burn with fire	Final, total destruction	Leviticus 21:9; Revelation 18:8	The same fire Babylon wielded becomes hers.

Why Does the Beast Turn on the Harlot?

- Her usefulness was instrumental. Once the beast is consolidated, she is competition, not an ally.
- The harlot commands allegiance through religion and commerce. The beast demands all allegiance. He will not share the worship of the world.
- The deepest reason, revealed in **V17**. The beast acts in self-interest and fulfils the eternal counsel of God.

The destruction of the harlot by the beast is not history escaping God's control — it is history proving it. The evillest coalition ever assembled is unwittingly doing God's bidding.

Revelation 17:17 — God's Sovereign Purpose: The Deepest Layer

The Most astonishing verse in the passage

Revelation 17:17, *"For God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled."*

1. God Governs the Hearts of the Beast's Coalition.

The ten kings believe they are acting on political calculation. They do not know they are executing the divine purpose. God has *put it into their hearts* did not coerce their hands but moved their willing hearts toward the outcome He has decreed. Scripture is consistent.

Isaiah 10:5–7, *"Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger And the staff in whose hand is My indignation. ⁶I will send him against an ungodly nation, And against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, To seize the spoil, to take the prey, And to tread them down like the mire of the streets. ⁷Yet he does not mean so, Nor does his heart think so; But it is in his heart to destroy, And cut off not a few nations."*

Proverbs 21:1, *"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes."*

Pharaoh, Assyria, the ten kings, God's enemies do not thwart His purpose. They carry it forward without knowing it.

2. The Beast Executes God's Judgment on the Harlot.

God uses the beast's own nature his lust for power, his hatred of rivals as the precise instrument by which the harlot is judged.

The Judge of all the earth does not always use angels and fire. Sometimes He uses the very system that opposed Him — and its destruction of a rival is itself the sentence of heaven being carried out.

3. 'Until the Words of God are fulfilled'.

A divine boundary is placed around the coalition's entire existence. Every prophetic word spoken through **Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation** has a fulfilment date.

The beast and his coalition serve that date.

Isaiah 46:10–11, *"Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, 'My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,' ¹¹ Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man who executes My counsel, from a far country. Indeed I have spoken it; I will also bring it to pass. I have purposed it; I will also do it."*

♦ **Napoleon and the Winter of 1812 — Moscow**

When Napoleon invaded **Russia in 1812**, he acted at the height of his power with supreme military confidence. He did not intend to destroy his Grand Armée or hand Europe's future to his enemies.

The Russian winter, the burning of Moscow, the catastrophic retreat — none of it was his plan. All of it became the turning point of his empire.

His strength became his vulnerability.

His ambition became his trap.

The beast and ten kings believe they are masters of history.

V 17 reveals they are instruments of it.

God does not argue with the beast. He appoints him and fulfils every word He has spoken through him.

Revelation 17:18 — The Woman Identified

Revelation 17:18, *"And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth."*

For John's first-century readers, one city reigned over the kings of the earth: **Rome**.

The identification was unmistakable.

The chapter ends where it began with the woman, now finally named.

Interpretive Position	Explanation
Rome as immediate referent	The city of seven hills ruling the known world. Seven heads = seven hills. Historically grounded.
Rebuilt Babylon	Some futurists expect a literal Babylon rebuilt on the Euphrates (Isaiah 13 ; Jeremiah 50–51).

End-time world-system	Rome is the type; the final world empire is the antitype.
Both/and	Rome historically, the final empire eschatologically, and the principle of anti-God civilisation in every age.

The woman is the city, and the city is the world-system — Rome in John's day, a final empire in the last days, and the principle of anti-God civilisation in every age between. Babylon is not confined to a postcode.

Theological Summary: V 15–18

Verse	Subject	Truth Declared	Implication
V 15	The waters	Harlot's reach is universal — all peoples, nations, tongues	No nation is outside her influence. The call to come out is universal.
V 16	The beast turns	The world-system is destroyed by the power it thought it controlled	Do not trust the world-system's stability. Every alliance is provisional.
V 17	God's purpose	God governs even the beast's coalition. All fulfils His word.	Nothing escapes God's governance. His people interpret the worst events without despair.
V 18	Woman identified	The harlot is the great city — Rome, final	The believer is called not to marvel at her

	empire, anti-God world power	but to separate from her.
--	------------------------------	---------------------------

Application

1. Do not marvel at what the World builds.

John marvelled at the harlot (**V 6**) and was rebuked for it. The harlot is magnificent dressed in purple and gold, holding out a cup.

The point is not that she is ugly. The point is that she is corrupt, and her beauty is her most effective weapon.

1 John 2:15–17, *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. ¹⁷And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."*

2. Recognise the World-System's instability.

The beast devours the harlot desolate, naked, flesh eaten, burned with fire.

No empire lasts.

No global system survives its own contradictions.

The harlot rode the beast, and the beast destroyed her. Every structure that ascends to global dominance carries within it the seeds of its own violent end.

Psalm 2:1–4, *"Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? ²The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, ³“Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.” ⁴He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; The Lord shall hold them in derision."*

3. Live under God's Governance — Not the World's uncertainty.

V 17 is the believer's anchor: *"God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose... until the words of God are fulfilled."*

Every election, war, and political realignment takes place within the brackets of God's sovereign purpose. This does not make the Christian passive. It makes the Christian **unafraid**.

Romans 8:28, *"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."*

4. Hear the Call: Come out of Her.

Revelation 18:4, *"Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues."*

The call is not to physical relocation but to spiritual separation from the world-system's values, allegiances, and seductions.

Are you drinking from her cup, or from the cup of the Lord?

The two cups appear in Revelation's final chapters. No one can drink from both.

Conclusion — God's Sentence Is Self-Executing

◆ Belshazzar's Feast — Babylon, 539 BC

On the night of **Daniel 5**, **Belshazzar** held a great feast and used the temple vessels to toast his gods. That night the writing appeared: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN — numbered, weighed, divided.

That same night Darius the Mede took the kingdom.

The harlot holds a golden cup. She appears indestructible. But God has already written the sentence.

The beast already hates her. The ten kings are waiting for the signal. And the words of God will be fulfilled — right on schedule, by instruments who do not even know they are being used.

Revelation 17:15–18 closes with three interlocking certainties:

- All peoples, nations, and tongues sit beneath her (**V 15**).
- She will be devoured and burned by the beast she rode (**V 16**).
- Every prophetic word will be fulfilled, on time, through willing but unknowing instruments (**V 17**).

If you are in Christ: You are called, chosen, and faithful. The harlot will be stripped, but you are clothed in His righteousness. Hold lightly to what she offers. Hold fast to what He has given.

If you have not trusted Christ: There is no neutral third option. The harlot's cup looks like life and ends in judgment. The Lamb offers Himself — and with Himself, a victory already secured. The call is still open.

For everyone here: God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose — until the words of God are fulfilled. Every word will be fulfilled. We are living in the until. Live in the light of what comes after it.

Theological Questions

Question	Notes
Does verse 17 mean God is the author of evil?	No. God does not implant evil desires — those are already present (James 1:14–15). He sovereignly directs pre-existing sinful motivations toward His appointed ends. See Joseph (Genesis 50:20), Assyria (Isaiah 10), and the cross itself (Acts 2:23).
Is Revelation 17's destruction of the harlot the same event as Revelation 18?	Most interpreters see Revelation 17 as the theological explanation and Revelation 18 as the extended lament. The two chapters are complementary perspectives on the same eschatological event.
Is the 'great city' Rome, Babylon, or Jerusalem?	The majority identify the great city as Rome (the immediate referent) with an eschatological dimension extending to the final world empire.

**How is God's
sovereignty in V 17
compatible with
human freedom?**

The seven hills, the global reign, and the first-century context all point to Rome as type with a final fulfilment ahead.

Compatibilism: The view that divine sovereignty and human freedom are not mutually exclusive is the position required by the whole of Scripture.

The ten kings choose freely.

God has put it in their hearts to make that free choice.

This mystery runs through **Exodus, the Assyrian conquest, the Babylonian exile, and supremely the cross (Acts 4:27–28).**