

[Dan opened his sermon with a brief reflection on conversations he has had regarding last week's message, followed by prayer. Watch the online sermon to hear those comments.]

I was in high school in 2000 when *Gladiator*, one of the most iconic movies of a generation, came out. It was an instant hit, winning five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. When I watched it for the first time, one scene gave me goosebumps. The character played by Russell Crowe was loyal to the true emperor, who was assassinated. This soldier's family was killed and he was made a slave who eventually had to fight in the games. He was taken to Rome, where he won all his contests. The crowds fell in love with him. The evil Emperor Commodus, the man who killed the rightful emperor and who ordered the killing of the soldier's family to gain power, came down and ordered this soldier to remove his helmet and reveal his true identity. Russell Crowe slowly removed his helmet, turned to face Commodus, and said, "My name is Maximus Decimus Meridius, commander of the Armies of the North, General of the Felix Legions and loyal servant to the true emperor, Marcus Aurelius. Father to a murdered son. Husband to a murdered wife. And I will have my vengeance, in this life or the next." I remember hearing those words and feeling the hair on my arms rise. I wanted to stand up in my seat and say, "Yeah! Yeah!" It stirred something deep inside of me, something inside almost everyone—there is a reason *Gladiator* won Best Picture!

All of us long for a champion who has the courage and the strength to stand up to evil, look it in the eyes, and defeat it once and for all. *Gladiator* was just a movie, but the book of Revelation tells us about the ultimate champion, Jesus, who comes dressed as a warrior, who dismantles and destroys all our enemies so that God can remake this world free from all evil, all wickedness, all pain, and all tears. Before God can make all things new, he must put all our foes in the pit of fire, never to emerge again. That's what we see as we continue in our study of Revelation. In the last few weeks, we've been introduced to some of our enemies:

- The dragon (Satan)
- The beast from the sea (evil governments)
- The beast from the land (false religions)

These are all images used in the book of Revelation to describe the realities of Satan, and how Satan works in the world today through evil governments and false religions to deceive people at a global scale. Today, we are going to be introduced to our other enemies:

- The prostitute (seductive culture)
- Death (the universal enemy)
- Hades (the dwelling of the dead)

The prostitute points to the seductive culture that intoxicates people, promising a life of luxury and pleasure. Death is the universal enemy and Hades is the place in the spiritual realms where dead souls dwell. These are the powers and principalities, the dark spiritual forces that wage war against God and his people. Jesus, our great champion, the ultimate warrior, will rise to the occasion, mount his white horse, bring out his sword, and with righteousness, virtue, and strength, destroy all our enemies, set us free from their tyrannical reign, and cleanse the earth once and for all of their evil. Though all these enemies are real and horrible, two and a half chapters are given to talking about the prostitute, so we'll spend a bit of time highlighting the ways in which she wages war against God's people.

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.” Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. 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, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery: “*Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes, and of the abominations of the earth.*” I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. (Revelation 17:1-6)

This woman, the prostitute, represents seductive culture, a culture that lures people out of the light into the darkness, that corrupts character and perverts all that is good and holy. She is described as sitting on a beast with blasphemous names. This is the same beast from chapter 13 that we learned about last week. Seductive culture always rides on the back of evil governments. That’s what happened in Roman history. We often look back at Rome with wonder and fascination because the Romans won so many battles, built so many great buildings, and ruled for so many centuries, but if you look past the veneer, Rome was detestable. Julius Caesar, this much-loved political figure, personally imprisoned more than 1 million people. Empress Messalina, Claudius’ wife, would sneak away from the palace at night and work in the local brothel in disguise because of her perverse appetite. Emperor Nero, the emperor who killed Paul and Peter, had a large swimming pool in his palace; the only people allowed in it were him and prepubescent boys. The Coliseum was built so that tens of thousands of people could watch other people be slaughtered, watch human beings kill each other and be eaten by wild animals. This grotesque culture worked in tandem with an evil government.

Revelation 17 also says the prostitute

- Was dressed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls (excessive wealth)
- Intoxicated rulers and commoners alike with her adulteries (sexual immorality)
- Was drunk with the blood of God’s holy people (gratuitous violence)

If we had time, we could dive deep into the intricacies of each of these descriptions, but I think it’s best to focus on the primary takeaway. Seductive culture lures and entices people with excessive wealth, sexual immorality, and gratuitous violence. Let’s unpack this considering what we’ve seen in the entire book of Revelation. We’ve seen how the dragon, Satan, uses the two beasts of evil government and false religion to destroy and deceive. Now we see the third part of the triangle. The prostitute represents seductive culture, specifically a pervasive spirit throughout culture that enchants people with an infatuation with excessive wealth, sexual immorality, and gratuitous violence. As we talked about, there are times throughout history and places around the world today where those two beasts have been or are very powerfully at work. I think here in America in the 21st century, our greatest danger is not the two beasts, but rather the prostitute. That’s both a challenging and a scary message. Here’s the reality: the dragon doesn’t mind if he can’t kill you through an evil government or deceive you through a false religion, so long as he can defile you through a seductive culture.

In the first century, the Roman Empire was the embodiment of the prostitutes' seductive culture. They were the global political and economic power. They used their status to import goods from all over the world and they exported their abominable immorality. People came for economic opportunity and left with a contagion. This is where we as Americans must be so self-aware. Right now, we are the global political and economic superpower. Right now, our country imports goods from all over the world. And as people come to the US from all over the world, sadly we export not just our education, our technology,

and our democracy, but we also export our immorality. I was recently overseas where people watch our movies, listen to our music, and follow our news. I asked people what they think about American culture. They responded with three words: money, sex, violence. The prostitute is at work among us. Listen to what research by Ted Baehr showcased: “Through television and movies, the average child in the US, by the age of 16, has witnessed 26,000 overt sex acts and as many as 400,000 sexual references and innuendo, as well as 33,000 murders and 200,000 portrayals of violence.” Our culture celebrates destructive, demonic values—the unashamed and unrestrained pursuit of excess wealth, sex, and violence. This is the culture that we were raised in. It’s so pervasive we can’t even see how integrated it is into our way of life. It’s so normal we are no longer alarmed or offended by it. We don’t see it as dangerous. Here’s a harsh reality that should stop many of us in our tracks: *Most Christians in America pay to be entertained by the very things from which Jesus died to save us.* This is the prostitute of Revelation at work. It’s not enough to have our defenses up against the two beasts; we must be on our guard against this even more insidious evil as well.

Most companies in America are subjected to an annual audit. Someone from the outside comes in and looks through all the finances and transactions of the company to see what’s really going on, to make sure there is nothing corrupt going on. Imagine that happened in your life. What do you think an outside audit would reveal about your life? If someone looked through your phone and your scrolling history, your bank statements, your Netflix accounts, your conversations, your thoughts and dreams, what would they see? Probably not all three, but would they find at least one area—money, sex, or violence—where the hooks of seductive culture have set in and diluted your devotion to Jesus? Revelation pulls back the curtain and says, “You thought your obsession with money was just about a little more luxury and comfort. You thought your sexual obsessions were just about a little more pleasure. No, no, no. That’s Satan at work, waging war against your soul.” God’s Word pulls the mask off these cultural norms and calls them by their real name: pure evil.

Revelation gives us a warning: “Then I heard another voice from heaven say: ‘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’” (Revelation 18:4). God is going to judge this evil seduction, and when judgment falls, he doesn’t want his people to be anywhere near the fallout. Now this command to “come out of her” doesn’t mean that we have to leave our country and become Amish or join a covenant or a monastery. God is not asking us to remove ourselves from the world; he wants us to live in the world and to be salt and light to change the world. God doesn’t want to pull us out from a corrupt world; he wants to pull the corruption of the world out from us. He wants us to be in the world without the world being in us. Here’s the rationale: not only does a seductive culture contaminate us, but it’s going to be judged and destroyed and we are not going to want to have any association with it. Think about the Nuremberg Trials after WWII. Yes, the war brought an end to the evil Nazi Regime, but in the years that followed, all the accomplices, those who aided and abetted the regime, were held accountable, too. God’s judgment is going to come against our seductive culture, and when it does, we are not going to want to have had anything to do with it. And so God’s word says to us, “Come out of her!”

If you are looking at Revelation as a whole, Revelation 12-18 identifies the enemies of God and his people, while Revelation 19-20 details their defeat. Quick review: We see Satan, evil governments, false religions, seductive culture, physical death, and the dwelling place of the dead. At the end of this book, every one of these enemies has been identified, unmasked, and exposed. We see our great enemies and all their wickedness on complete display. It’s enough to make even the most courageous and faith-filled person curl into a ball in fear and terror. But then Jesus, our great defender, our Messiah, the lion and the lamb, our deliverer, our defender, our stronghold, our fortress, our anchor, our champion, rises and fights the battle we could not fight.

One of my most vivid and most shameful memories from my childhood happened one day on my way home from elementary school. I lived three or four blocks from Red Rock Elementary School in Las Vegas. There was a group of about 20-25 kids who walked home after school down the same street. One day while we were walking, a bully in the group started picking on a smaller kid. He began by calling him names, then spitting in his hair, then pushing him to the ground, then kicking him. This kid was helpless. I remember this feeling in my stomach, feeling horrible about what was going on, but not feeling like I had the courage or the strength to do anything about it. I look back on that day with such regret and shame. But it's really a picture of this passage. These evil bullies have been assaulting humanity and they think it's going to last forever, that no one will stand up to them, that they will have the final word. But Jesus is the King of kings. He is the Lord of lords. He is surrounded by the armies of heaven. His eyes are like blazing fire. His robe is dipped in blood. He comes to our rescue, fighting the battle we could not fight, and he vanquishes our enemies forever. Listen to these words:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords. (Revelation 19:11-16)

Jesus rises up and goes to war. But it's not a battle! There's no fight. There is no back and forth, trading blows. Just like God spoke a Word and brought the universe into existence by the strength of his will, Jesus speaks a single word, and his enemies are vanquished. You can't fight the author and source of life. When you do, you die. Jesus rides out on his white horse, destroys every single one of them, and then throws them into a lake of fire! Everyone needs a hero like that.

After the battlefield, when all our enemies are defeated, there are two final scenes: a courtroom and a wedding banquet.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. (Revelation 20:11-12)

One day, after the last battle, we will stand before God and give an account for our life, for all our deeds. We won't be saved by our works—we are saved by the blood of Christ, by placing our faith in him. But we will be judged and rewarded based on what we have done. I've got three kids. They turn our house into a disaster zone every once in a while. When I tell them to clean up, to their credit, they always begin the work. When I tell them they get a cookie if they do a great job, they work five times better and faster. Revelation ends with a reminder that God rewards us for the lives we live. For every prayer offered in faith, every generous gift invested into the kingdom, every expression of selfless love, every person pointed to Christ, there will be a reward. What a reminder to not be living for the world, to not be investing in things that are going to burn up, to not be enticed by a seductive culture, but to live for God and for eternity.

But it's not just rewards for our righteous deeds. Those who did not believe in Jesus, whose names are not in the book of life, will face judgment.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:13-15)

This is not a message of hellfire and brimstone. This is not trying to scare anyone into faith. But this is a very real and very sober reminder: salvation and eternity are God's gift to those who believe in Jesus. If you have not placed your faith in Jesus, today is the day!! Don't wait a moment longer.

But it's not just a courtroom with judgment and rewards; there's also a wedding banquet, where the marriage that the entire universe has been anticipating since the dawn of creation will take place.

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "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!" And he added, "These are the true words of God." (Revelation 19:6-9)

I don't know what it would be for you, but the greatest day in my life was the day I married Keren. We were joined by all our closest family and friends and the entire day was filled with excessive amounts of laughter, joy, celebration and love. That day, though spectacular, lasted but a few hours. There is going to be a wedding that will last for all of eternity. Our Messiah, Christ—the groom—will meet his people, the church, his bride, and the celebration, joy, and love will last forever.

There are about a dozen guys who come over to my house on Thursday nights for a discipleship meeting. We are all memorizing Psalm 27 together, and so I decided to have my kids do it with us. The other day I was putting my kids to bed and as they were reciting the verses, I thought, "This is what Revelation is all about." Close your eyes and listen to these words.

The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident. One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple...wait for the Lord, be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord. (Psalm 27:1-4,14)