

Cities are miracles of human invention. Anyone who thinks five consecutive minutes about what makes a city work will find himself in a state of exhaustion. So many systems have to work together reasonably well everyday to sustain the cities and networks of cities we inhabit.

Four cities, New York, Washington, Silicon Valley, and Los Angeles, define American culture. It's not because everything important happens there. It's because those cities shape the way people think about money, sex, and power. They have enormous influence over how the whole world thinks.

What happens when the City of Man goes bad? What happens when the powers that shape the way people think **love delusions and seek false gods?** (Psalm 4:2) What happens when **the wicked freely strut about** and **what is vile is honored among men** (Psalm 12:8) because the City of Man has lost its way?

The book of Revelation emerged in a world where its chief city had gone bad. Where was that tipping point? When did the inevitable immorality and injustice in everything human cross a line and make the miracle of the city demonic?

John, who wrote Revelation, found the tipping point in the City of Man's treatment of Christians. Christians then as Christians now marry, have their homes, bear and rear their young, and work and buy and sell and worship and die in cities. They have favorite leisure spots and favorite parts of city life. In John's day the City of Man turned against Christians. It confiscated their property and imprisoned them. (Hebrews 10:32-34) It scapegoated them. (Matthew 5:11) It had some put to death for their faith in Christ and with the threat of further action. (Revelation 2:13) John's third vision in the book of Revelation envisions the City of Man gone bad.

### The City of Man

Another angel invites John to see the vision. It is the vision of a beautiful and wealthy woman. But she is a prostitute, and **with her the kings of the earth commit adultery.** (Revelation 17:2) The kings betray their own people in order to enjoy her favors. Her wealth and power and pleasures intoxicate them. She is a generous harlot. **The woman John sees is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.** (Revelation 17:18) Everyone hearing Revelation knows at once that John is talking about the city of Rome.

Rome the harlot is **sitting on a scarlet beast that is covered with blasphemous names and has seven heads and ten horns.** (Revelation 17:3) It is the same beast, which embodies the fury of the great red Dragon and makes war against the Church. It is the Empire Rome rules. The woman rides that beast, controls the beast. She shapes the way the Empire thinks about money, sex, and power. And she is gorgeous, **dressed in purple and scarlet, and ... glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls.** (Revelation 17:4) She embodies the City of Man at its most resplendent.

But what is this in her hand? **She holds a golden cup in her hand,** another luxurious token of her riches – until we see the drink she has poured for herself. The cup is **filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries.** No cow chip in a silk purse ever seemed more repulsive than the poison she drinks from her golden cup. John looks more closely and sees **that the woman is drunk.** The people of the world sit at her feet, the wealth of the world lies at her disposal, and she can enjoy them only in a drunken stupor.

And what strong drink reduces the Queen of the Earth to a staggering whore? John sees **that the woman is drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bear testimony to Jesus.** (Revelation 17:6) The City of Man had crossed the tipping point. The City of Man has become demonic. Her doom is sealed.

John tells us that the **ten horns of the beast are ten kings ... who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast ... They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.** (Revelation 17:12-14) And we know they overcome like the Lamb overcame: **they do not love their lives so much as to shrink from death** (Revelation 12:11) for the sake of the Lamb.

Other seeds of the harlot's destruction begin to grow. **The beast** (the Empire she rules) **and the ten horns** (the petty kings who rule at her pleasure) **... will hate the prostitute (Rome). They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose.** (Revelation 17:16-17) Evil ultimately destroys itself; such is the justice of God.

No wonder **another angel coming down from heaven ... with a mighty voice ...** shouts: **“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit.”** (Revelation 18:1-2) No wonder another voice from heaven says to the Church: **“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, for her sins are piled up to heaven, and God has remembered her crimes.”** (Revelation 18:4-5)

Neither Jesus Christ, who revealed this vision to John, nor John, who wrote it down, is insensitive to the appalling collapse of the City of Man. **When the kings of the earth who commit adultery with her and share her luxury see the smoke of her burning . . . they will stand far off and cry: “Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!”** (Revelation 18:9-10)

**The merchants of the earth . . . will weep and mourn and cry out: “Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!”** (Revelation 18:11-16) . . . **Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship . . . will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out: “Woe! Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth! In one hour she has been brought to ruin!”** (Revelation 18:17-19)

## The Second Coming

Then John hears **what sounds 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.”** (Revelation 19:6-8)

But first, the Bridegroom must make all things ready. He rides a white horse. His name is **Faithful and True.** (Revelation 19:11) **He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.** (Revelation 19:13) **On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: King of kings and Lord of lords.** (Revelation 19:15-16) He vindicates the martyrs. He judges the world with justice. One by one: first the beast, then the false prophet, then **the devil who deceived them** (Revelation 20:10), finally **death and Hades**, the place of death, are **thrown into the lake of fire.** (Revelation 20:14)

**And John sees the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books are opened. Another book is opened, which is the book of life. The dead are judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. (Revelation 20:12) If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:15)**

### The City of God

**Then John sees a new heaven and a new earth. (Revelation 21:1) One of the seven angels** says to him, **“Come, I will show you, not the prostitute this time, but the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” (Revelation 21:9)** Once again, this woman, **the bride**, is a city.

John stands with hands extended to offer us a new vision to sustain us through the City of Man's inevitable betrayals of our hopes. It is the vision of a City John calls **the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. (Revelation 21:10)** We call it the City of God. John's fourth and final vision takes us on a tour of that City.

It is a place of beauty. **It shines with the glory of God, and its brilliance is like that of a very precious jewel. (Revelation 21:11)** In fact, all the jewels of Paradise accent the public places of the City of God. **(Revelation 21:19)** The City's 12 gates are single pearls, and the great, central street of the City is paved in gold. **(Revelation 21:21) The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. (Revelation 21:24)** It is comforting to think that human achievements, purged of their evil uses, will be welcome there.

It is a place of healing and the promise of unending life and unwearied strength for the nations of the world. **The angel shows John the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great (gold-paved) street of the city. On each side of the river stands the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.**

Its beauty and its healing properties befit the inhabitants of the City of God. John hears **a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. (Revelation 21:3)** The healing of the nations includes a new identity for the nations. Their national identities don't go away; they morph into something new. In the City of God they become **his people**. The title once reserved for Israel and the Church now belongs to all nations. They are all **his people and the sheep of his pasture. (Psalm 100:2)**

The great Reality of the City of God is God's presence. **God himself will be with them and be their God. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4) The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. (Revelation 21:23)** Mankind started in a garden; we start anew in the City of God.

### Take Aways

The message of the book of Revelation is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, and He did not retire to a sunny island in Paradise. He has set God's purpose into motion and moves the nations of the earth toward the day when **“The**

**kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”**

Jesus Christ and His Church do not belittle or seek to nullify the prodigious efforts of mankind to feed and heal and govern itself. Neither are they naïve about the evil that dogs Man’s best efforts. John’s vision of Rome as a beautiful and bloodthirsty harlot expresses that evil in an image of enduring danger to the City of Man. Most distressing, John **saw that the woman was drunk**. The command and control center of the Empire was impaired like a drunk driver. Achievements of centuries hung in the balance.

A sorrow deep within our national soul prepares us to receive John’s vision of the City of Man. We once caught a glorious glimpse of a vision of our own beloved land. “O beautiful for patriot dream That sees beyond the years Thine alabaster cities gleam, Undimmed by human tears! America! America! God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self control, Thy liberty in law.” We no longer sing that, because we no longer believe that. The deluge of our national contradictions, violence, and permissive sensuality has snuffed it out.

No vision of the common good unites us “from sea to shining sea.” Washington is not drunk, but it putters around civic life like an old man trying to fill his days with something meaningful. When same-sex marriage, the legalization of marijuana, and the regulation of Big Gulps in Manhattan are the moral imperatives of our time, Lady Liberty has lost a lot of her luster. She just looks tired right now.

We live in uncertain, confusing, and dangerous times. The Christian faith emerged in uncertain, confusing, and dangerous times. It offers real help and hope in times like these. What it does not offer is an escape into fantasy. The book of Revelation is not an escape into fantasy. It offers a different way to look at the world that is rooted in the realities of Easter and restores hope. It foretells the coming of the City of God.

But isn’t the City of God too far into the future to help us right here, right now? Not if you remember that construction on the City of God has already begun. In John’s vision the New Jerusalem, the City of God, has twelve gates, and **on the gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel**; and **The wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb**. (Revelation 21:12,14)

The Church in all Her beautiful, maddening, global diversity is embryo to the City of God to come. This is why the Church is not shrinking; it is expanding. The propaganda masters don’t want you to know that. They have no idea of the energy within the American church. And when you step outside the American and European context, the Church is on fire.

The Church rises in the slums of Caracas and in the upscale condos of Shanghai. The royal family of Saudi Arabia and the dictator of North Korea can’t stop it. There are more Christians in Africa, south of the Sahara Desert, than there are people in the United States. Christ is building a global Church that renounces violence, gives glory to God in its worship, and bears witness to Christ throughout the whole wide world. The energy of God courses through her congregations. It is the energy of an athlete stepping into the arena to compete. It is the joy of a bride proceeding to her groom at the altar.

Our uncertain, confusing, and dangerous world needs the Church, because the Church remembers God. She remembers the covenants by which God has bound Himself

to His people through uncertain times. She remembers His wisdom that guides His people through confusing times. She remembers her martyrs, who faced danger, because **they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.**

Don't stand aloof from Christ and His Church. As in the days of Noah the ark was the only place of safety from the deluge, so in our day the Church is the only place of safety from the deluge to come. Bring yourself and all those you love into this ark and find rest for your souls.

**The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.** (Revelation 22:17) But don't come and sniff and sip. Come and drink deeply. This water satisfies for a lifetime and then forevermore.