

The Forces of Evil

Revelation 13

This past week Joanne and I were in southern Colorado for a Van Dyke reunion. Several members of the family went white-water rafting on the Arizona river. Recent rains made the ride particularly dangerous, with several class 4 and 5 rapids. I looked up the definition of class 5 rapids and read, "Extremely difficult, long, and very violent rapids...Failure to execute a specific maneuver at a specific point may result in serious injury or death." It's important to understand what you are facing before you take the ride.

In a similar way, Jesus wants us to understand that the Christian life is not an easy tubing trip down the lazy Muskegon River in August. It is much more like a white-water rafting trip – there are spiritual dangers on every side. We will face the rapids of trials, some great some small. We must navigate the rocks of temptations, and the deadly whirlpools of false teachings. On this journey, some will lose their life, other's will lose their faith.

This past week I was deeply saddened to read that Joshua Harris, *author of I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and longtime pastor of a mega church in Maryland, has just divorced his wife of 22 years and publicly renounced the faith. "I am no longer a Christian." He was faced with a choice between the sexual revolution and biblical Christianity. To his credit, he realized that the two could not be reconciled – and chose the revolution. He's not the first. He certainly won't be the last. Jesus said that in the last days, many will fall away (see Matt. 24:10).

In chapter 12 we saw a great red dragon, the Devil making war in the heavens. But he was defeated and cast down to earth. He knows that his time is short before he will be cast into the eternal abyss, and in this period he vents his fury upon the church of Christ.

Now in chapter 13 Jesus gives us information and insight concerning the Devil's powers and methods so that we will be equipped to stand against him in our day.

To keep things clear, notice that there are three distinct demonic figures presented in chapters 12-13, an unholy trinity of evil.

- The great red dragon (12)
- The sea beast (13:1-10)
- A beast from the earth (13:11ff)

We need to understand that we, the church of Jesus Christ, are facing a true, mighty, demonic kingdom. As Paul writes in **Ephesians 6:12**,

...we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

I. The Sea Beast (1-10)

13:1 *And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.*

A. His Identity – Political Oppression

We are told in verse 2 that the beast was “like a leopard, with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion.” This is a direct reference to a vision we find in Daniel 7. Daniel has a vision where he sees 4 kingdoms represented as four great beasts:

Lion – Babylonia **Bear** – Medo-Persian **Leopard** – Greece **4th** – Rome

This beast is a composite; he represents all four of them. The point is that this beast is not a singular historical person or event, but the principality and power behind the kingdoms of this world in their opposition to the rule and reign of God. This beast represents the re-occurring **political** oppression of the church.

D.A. Carson: “The beast re-occurs throughout history. He is Antiochus Epiphanes, He is Nero, and Pope Innocent III and Mao Tse Tung. He is a recurring beast who exercises great authority in historic, concrete contexts, to oppose the people of God.”

The re-occurring nature of the beast is also revealed in his seemingly miraculous recovery from a great wound (v. 3). Every time it seems the beast is defeated, he comes back.

The early church experienced this dramatically in the death of Nero and the rise of Domitian. Nero was a truly demonic force of oppression and evil, and when he died by suicide in 68 AD the church rejoiced. But 12 years later, Domitian rose to power and was just as evil and oppressive as Nero ever was. The beast keeps coming back.

All through the age of the church, there will be re-occurring instances of pure evil rising up to oppose God and oppress the church. In modern history we’ve had Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot of Cambodia, and Idi Amin, the Butcher of Uganda. In many parts of the world today the beast is manifested in Islamic governments and organizations as they ruthlessly persecute the church. Everywhere you see political and social oppression of the truth and people of God, you are seeing the work of the beast from the sea.

B. His Nature – Defined by Blasphemy

In verse 1 we are told the beast *"has blasphemous names on its heads."* In verses 5-6 we see that this beast opens its mouth to blaspheme against God's name and his people.

The early church would quickly recognize a reference to the Caesars of Rome who liked to ascribe to themselves the name of God. Emperor Domitian demanded to be referred to as "Our Lord and our God." That is clear, blatant blasphemy.

But we see this same blasphemous spirit in our culture today in men like Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*. Just 2 years ago, Richard Dawkins "challenged Irish police to arrest him for blasphemy." In an article for *The Irish Times*, the outspoken atheist and evolutionary biologist said he would "be available for arrest on a charge of blasphemy" as he gave a public lecture in Ireland. Dawkins quoted a sentence from his book, *The God Delusion*:

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."¹

That is blasphemy. And it is quickly becoming the "truth" of our secular age. The idea that the God of Scripture, and those who believe in him, are homophobic, misogynistic, and racist is so prevalent it is accepted as a given fact. It no longer needs to be proven.

The blasphemous beast not only rails against God but demands for himself the worship and obedience that rightfully belong to God. Notice how often the idea of worship is mentioned.

13:4 *And they **worshiped** the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they **worshiped** the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"*

13:8 *...and all who dwell on earth will **worship** it...*

13:12 *...the earth beast makes the inhabitants of earth **worship** the sea beast.*

For the early church the application of this text was straightforward and impossible to avoid. The emperors actually did demand worship at their temples. All Roman citizens were required to give homage to the Roman gods and the rulers. And everyone went along with it. How could you stand against the power of Rome? "Who can stand against it?" People accepted the blasphemous demands of Roman rulers and the pagan society as just the way it was. Only a fool would resist. Those who did faced consequences.

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/stephen-fry-blasphemy-ireland-probe-investigation-richard-dawkins-arrest-a7728321.html>

In verse 7 we read that the beast was “*allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them*” – in other words, he is allowed to persecute and kill them. All according to the eternal purpose and plan of God.

13:10 *If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain.*

As we’ve seen before, God has determined that some of his children will suffer a martyr’s death. This calls for “the endurance and faith of the saints” (v. 10).

The sea beast represents the political oppression of the church, even to death. It is happening today in the governmental crackdown of the Chinese church. We should not be surprised to see it happen even here in our own country. Jesus tells us so that we will be prepared, we will not be surprised, and our faith will not be shaken. If it happens, we will simply know that Revelation 13 is being proven true.

II. The Earth Beast

13:11-12 *Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.*

This beast is much different – it does not appear like a fearsome animal like a leopard or bear. It appears like a lamb. It is winsome, attractive, appealing, and religious.

Derek Thomas: “Whereas the beast of the sea appears to exercise *political* power, the beast of the earth...bears all the trappings of *religion*.”

- He is called a “false prophet” (Rev. 16, 19).
- He performs signs and wonders.
- He has his own bestial baptism – an identifying mark on the hand and forehead.
- Whereas the sea beast was defined by **blasphemy**, this beast is defined by **idolatry**. In verses 12-14 he makes people worship the first beast, even creating an image of the sea beast so that people will worship. His purpose is to make people serve the beast and join his rebellion against the Lord.

A. He is Convincing

13:13 *It performs great signs, even making fire to come down from heaven to earth in front of people.*

Just like Pharaoh's magicians were able to mimic some of the plagues, the earth beast will amaze and astonish people. His message will appear to be very credible, supported by impressive evidences, even "great signs".

But notice that the purpose of the signs is not to enlighten but to **deceive**:

13:14 And by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth...

B. He is Deceptive

The Earth beast wields its power through deception. Remember, he **looks** like a lamb, but **speaks** with the voice of the dragon. He, like his spiritual father the devil, wields his power through deceit.

How did the Devil get Eve to fall into sin? Coercion? Threats? No, just simple deception – a little truth mixed with a little error and a few important things left out, and he had the perfect concoction to destroy the human race. And so it goes.

C. He is Effective

In 13:14 we are told that this beast "deceives **those who dwell on earth.**" In the book of Revelation, the phrase "those who dwell on earth" refers to all mankind except the elect children of God. In other words, the god of this world, the prince of darkness, deceives **all** those who do not belong to Christ. By the power of this spiritual force of deception, the people of this world "exchange the truth of God for a lie" (Rom. 1:25).

This is important to know. You will find yourself at times feeling like a tiny minority in a sea of spiritual blindness and wonder, *if this gospel is true, why am I the only one who believes it? How can I be right when everyone else around me is convinced that I'm wrong?*

You will begin to doubt your faith, not because you are shown evidence that it is false, but because you simply can't believe that the whole world could be wrong. You need to remember Revelation 13. The beast will deceive the whole world – **everyone** whose name is not written in the Lamb's book of life. You will be in the minority on earth – but you are part of the unanimous majority in heaven! Every saint and angel in heaven agrees with you!

D. He is Coercive

13:15 – He causes those who will not worship the image of the beast to be slain

13:16-17 – he also causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, slave and free, to be marked on the right hand or forehead "so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name" (v. 17).

What is the mark of the beast? I think Dennis Johnson is correct when he says that it refers to coercive compliance in **thought** (the mark on the forehead) and **actions** (the mark on the hand) with the principles of the beast. And those who do not comply will find themselves excluded from the economy and markets of the world.

In the early church, if you wanted to participate in the economy, in the marketplace, you needed to belong to one of the trade guilds – and pay homage to its patron god or goddess. Christians, of course, would not do this, and so lost their ability to buy and sell.

One of the prime examples of this demonic spiritual coercion in our day is the increasing pressure, from the government and from businesses, for compliance with the new religion of sexual autonomy.

Someone gave me a copy of a poster put out by a well-known corporation here in town, which urged all employees to wear a button to publicly identify as friends of the LGBTQ community. The CEO of this company has joined with over 700 CEOs around the nation to aggressively promote the LGBTQ agenda. The poster explains what it means to be a “friend” – a sort of catechism of the new religion:

- It begins with a confessional statement: “I know that everyone deserves love and that all love is equal.”
- “I have conversations with people who are not open to the LGBTQ community and share my message of acceptance.” That’s a promise to evangelize the new faith.
- “Even though I don’t identify as LGBTQ, I still attend Pride events.” I attend the public worship of the new religion.
- “I support companies that depict non-traditional family structures in their advertising.” “I call out instances of homophobia and transphobia.” This is a commitment to live in compliance with the new religion. And most people will.

The question the world will ask is “Who is like the beast and who can stand against it?” The vast majority of people, when push comes to shove, will bow down before this new religion. Resistance will seem futile.

The question for us will be “Whom will we follow – the Lord Jesus Christ or the beast?” Jesus helps us with the answer in the last verse.

The Number of the Beast

13:18 *This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.*

Who is the man referenced by this number 666? There have been many, many suggestions – Martin Luther, Oliver Cromwell, the Pope, even Henry Kissinger. Many people think that it is a reference to Nero, the degenerate Caesar of Rome. If you write his name in Hebrew, and count the value of the letters, it comes to 666.

But I think it's best to see this number not as an individual but, like the rest of the chapter, as a principle. The number 666 is notable because of what it isn't. Remember, numbers matter in Revelation. Seven is a very important number – the number of perfection. Three is a very important number – the number of the Triune God. So, 777 is the number of the eternally perfect, Triune God.

The number 666 is the number of man. The point is that the powers of hell, exercised through wicked men and women of earth – will never, ever, ever be equal to the power and glory of the ever-living God. No matter how fierce the Devil might be, no matter how powerful the kingdoms of men might seem – it's always 666, always falling short, always failing, always losing, never surpassing or surprising or supplanting the sovereign living God.

And that's the point. The Devil and all his hosts are already defeated foes. He cannot harm one of God's children. The Lord will keep his own.

Did you notice **13:8**? There is a mighty exception to the reach of the Devil's deceptions: *And all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has **not** been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.*

In other words, everyone whose name HAS been written in the Lamb's book of life will NOT worship the beast, will NOT be deceived by the beast, and will NOT comply with his demonic demands. There is an innumerable host of saints who will stand, who will conquer and triumph. Their victory is all by the power and purpose of God. They are:

- sovereignly chosen before the foundation of the world.
- thoroughly redeemed and saved to the uttermost by the Lamb who was slain.
- now protected and kept by the King who reigns.

Now you might be thinking, *What about Joshua Harris? Why wasn't he protected?*

That's a fair question. I don't know Josh's story. I don't know why he made such a tragic

decision. He maybe would have a hard time telling you himself. But I know this: Jesus told his Heavenly Father, "I have not lost one of those you have given me," and Jesus doesn't lie. Jesus told his disciples in **John 10:27–28**,

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.

I don't know Josh's story – but I trust my Savior.

The reason people go white-water rafting, even in class 5 rapids, is that every raft has an expert guide, and they trust the guide. In this Christian life there are many dangers, toils, and snares. But we have every reason to trust the guide. Jesus has brought us safely thus far, and he promises to lead us home. That means, in spite of the dangers around us we can enjoy the ride. We get to do this. We get to live the one life we have – with Jesus, for his cause, and for his glory. We need to be serious – but we don't have to be afraid. We can joyfully take up our calling and gladly follow our loving Lord wherever he leads. Amen.