

Making Sense of Revelation
The Tale of Two Empires
September 23, 2007

Invite to take our sermon notes and study guides.

We're in the second of three weeks about the book of Revelation. Last week, Aaron introduced us to this type of writing called apocalyptic literature. This particular book was written by John, the revelator, probably also the author of the gospel of John, was using a common form of writing among Jews and Jewish-Christians of that period. John uses symbols and images to communicate a message of encouragement and faithfulness to churches that are undergoing a persecution, ordered by the Roman Emperor Domitian, in the mid-90's AD.

There are many ways that faithful Christians can interpret this book. Aaron mentioned four major perspectives on this book last week, and I think it's important to review them this week. No matter which one of these perspectives you think you are in, I want to challenge us all to be open minded about the other perspectives and try to see the value in them.

The Futurist perspective says that the events in Revelation are yet to come...they are in the future....they are the things that will happen around the time of the final return of Christ. This interpretation is depicted in the widely popular "Left Behind" book series. This perspective really long been associated with Revelation, but it is only in the last 150 years that it has become a wide-spread way to read it.

The Historical perspective belongs to those who believe that Revelation is about the events that would happen from John's day to the second coming of Christ. And this perspective was the dominant way of looking at Revelation for 500 years.

The Preterist perspective believes that most of what we read in the book of Revelation is describing something that was happening at that time. This view holds that the events happened in the first century and that John was writing about the things that were happening to them. There are truths about God and about people and about forces of evil that transcend time and speak to us today, but the events that are described are not events that will unfold in the future.

The Idealist perspective says that Revelation is not describing any actual events at all. Rather, the book is describing the kinds of spiritual conflucts that happen in every generation, in every follower of Christ. In every generation there is a conflict between God and Satan, and ultimately, God wins!

Most people who really study this book are not completely in one camp. It's hard for a futurist, let's say, to deny that the images in Revelation are depicting events of persecution and God's deliverance of his people that were happening at that time. It's also hard for the Preterist (and I'm 90% Preterist) to deny that some passages are only about the past and not also about the future. Certainly, the conflict of good vs evil exists in all generations, so it is easy to also see things from the idealist's perspective.

Today, we're going to be dealing with the passage that has more buzz about it than any other in the book. Differing interpretations of this passage vary widely, so I'm going to guide us through this by understanding first what John meant to the people who received his letter...then we'll apply it to our lives today.

Today's Scripture: Revelation 13:1-4, 16-18

I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. 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?"

Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. It's number is six hundred sixty-six.

Before we get there, however, I want to tell you about one of my experiences in a church with this very passage. It was my first year in seminary, 1988. Someone had written a booklet and mailed it to every church in North Carolina, and it was entitled "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Happen in 1988."

This pamphlet claimed that the second coming of Jesus was going to happen on a specific Monday in October. The media picks up on this and it becomes a high attention story for about one week. They even interviewed one of my professors about it.

On the Sunday before Jesus was to return, I was with several students went to a very fundamental church. We thought it must be a pretty good gig for a preacher, because the Pastor's parking place was right next to the door, and in it was a brand new, candy-apple red Camaro convertible. The preacher that day preached about the upcoming return of Christ and used this very passage today. He told them that today might be a good day to give everything they had to the church, since they weren't going to need it. He told them that today would be a right day to get right with God, and then, sadly, he brought out the fear. "If you're not ready to go with Jesus, then you'll have to sell your soul to buy milk for your children or for the surgery that will save your husband's life.

When he was done scaring everyone, he offered an altar call. And the first person up there fell down and cried, face in his hands. It was a 10 year-old boy, and my heart sank when I saw the fear that had been instilled in this kid. This is why I mostly read Revelation from the Preterist viewpoint. Because I believe that for us to get the truest message of this letter, we have to understand it the way that they would have understood it, then bring the truths into our world, our lives, and apply them.

The alternative is that the message of hope and encouragement John intends for his audience becomes a message of fear that people use at best to misinform, and at worst to manipulate others.

On the lighter side of that October day in 1988, I saw Dan, a friend of mine, write a note on his worship program and stick it under the wiper blades of that camaro convertible. So I asked him, "Dan, what was that about?"

Dan said, "Oh, I just left him a little note>"

"Well what did it say?"

"It said, 'If you go, leave the keys!'"

So let's take a look, what is all this about...

Dragons, Beasts, Whores and the 666

The prevalence of emperor worship and the worship of Rome...

In AD 54, Nero became emperor of Rome at the age of 17. He was one of the most cruel and narcissistic emperors ever. Along with his lust for power, he was driven by his desire for sensual experiences, which often took perverse and evil forms.

In the case of Julius and Augustus Caesar, and the emperor Tiberius, the senate declared them to be gods after their death. This didn't suit Nero, who at least wanted everyone to think he was divine and claimed to be a god worthy of worship while he was still alive. So he created idols and images of himself and demanded worship of his image across the Roman Empire.

In AD 64, about 2/3 of the city of Rome burns. Many Romans at the time believed the Nero was behind it all, because he wanted to build a new palace, The golden palace, in the center of the city. Whether or not Nero did instigate the fire, he did go ahead with his plans and build his palace. And to divert attention to himself about the blame for the fire, he said that it was a punishment from the gods on Rome because Romans were tolerating the existence of an atheistic cult. This cult did not believe in the Roman gods, but rather in a man who claimed to be the son of God and was resurrected from the dead...Christians.

So a series of persecutions was launched upon the Christians with the full force of the power of the emperor. Christians were arrested, tortured. Some were dipped in tar and mounted on poles or columns to be set on fire as living lanterns for Nero's dinner parties. Among the Christians in Rome at the time were two of its greatest leaders; Peter, who was crucified upside-down, and Paul, who was beheaded. Nero's persecution was so harsh, so cruel and so thorough that the general population of Rome began to take pity on the Christians.

This is just part of Nero's legacy. Within the next ten years, he would turn his attention against the Christians spiritual cousins, the Jews, and would complete the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and the slaughtering of over one millions Jews.

So keeping this in mind, let's look at what the passage we're read teaches us, in particular about the beasts and the dragon.

Who is the Dragon?

Grab a Bible and open it with me to Revelation 12:9 and we'll take a look at the description there of these enemies of God who are persecuting God's people.

The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was trown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

So John clearly tells us the Dragon is the devil, and the picture is that the devil was thrown out of the heavens and so he comes to the earth to devour and destroy God's people. So we know that the dragon is Satan.

Who is the Beast?

If we turn to Chapter 13, 1-4, we see that the Dragon calls forth a beast that will rise up out of the sea. I want you to ask, "how did the first recipients of this message hear and interpret this passage?" Apocalyptic literature carries over an OT theme of the chaos and mystery of the sea being connected to evil. So here's what it says,

I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems (or crowns), and on its heads were blasphemous names (names reserved for God). And the beast (always a nation or empire, heads are the rulers and horns are its power) that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. (These images of lion, bear, and leopard occur in Daniel, the only other apocalyptic book in the Bible. Beasts always mean a nation or empire. The three empires that these beasts represent in Daniel are the Babylonian, the Median-Persian, and Greece. What this is saying is that the current beast is like those three previous merciless empires). And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority (so who is the power behind the empire?). One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. The heads of the beasts are the rules of the empires. And this current ruler resembles a previous ruler who was dead, but is alive again in that his spirit of persecution against God's people has returned. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. 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?"

Do you think that they could name the beast? It's really not all that difficult when you put all the clues together...it's an evil empire that resembles other empires that waged war against God's people; its current leader is in many ways the same person as a former leader; it demands worship from the people; and it is so overwhelmingly powerful that no one can see rising up against it.

Rome. The Roman Empire, which is now waging war against the church through its current emperor, Domitian – mid 90's AD – looks just like Rome did 30 years before under another leader named Nero.

Who is the whore? Why is she called Babylon?

Now just in case there is any chance we could be wrong about this understanding, John gives us other clues about this beast over in **17:9**

This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are the seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven heads.

John describes a woman who sits on top of the beast. The woman represents a city, a city with seven hills...Rome. Rome is the beast, the empire, but it is also a city, the capital city. And John describes this city as a harlot, a prostitute who does business with the merchants of the world. He also calls this city "Babylon", but Babylon was not much of a city in the Roman era. He calls it Babylon because there were only two empires that ever destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. Babylon, in 586 BC, and Rome in 72 AD. Chapters 17-18 are about the judgment that will come to Rome, predicting her fall, and conjuring up thoughts for the Christians who received this letter that just as Babylon now is no threat to God's people, so it will also be with Rome. And in fact, in time, Rome became the epicenter of the church.

Now, what about the beast and the mark of the beast? The 666. Even if you don't go to church and don't read the Bible, you've heard about the 666. And there are lots of explanations as to what the 666 means. And in each and every generation it means something or someone else who has in some way embodied evil.

So let's look back at chapter 13, at the second half of the verses we read earlier. ***Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave to be marked***

on the right hand or the forehead (marking on the had, wrist or forehead was a common way to mark slaves with a brand of ownership. The notion of a mark here is about who you belong to, not about a physical mark. Remember that these Christians were faced with a choice...either go worship the image of the emperor and avoid persecution or remain steadfast and endure. Some of them argued, “well, what does it really matter. I don’t mean it, but if I can avoid persecution...” and John is warning that to accommodate to Rome is to put a mark on your soul. Those who remain faithful also have a mark, but it the seal or mark of God.), **so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark** (one form of persecution was economic – you weren’t allowed to buy or sell in the market – controlled by roman authorities – if you did not worship the right gods), **that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. It’s number is six hundred sixty-six.**

You will remember that Roman Numerals are also letters, right. This is true in all ancient languages...letters were given numerical values.

If we use Hebrew as the base language, and we calculate 666, it goes like this...remember that Hebrew has no vowels, except the long O sound, the vov.

N	R	O	N	Q	S	R
50	200	6	50	100	60	200

So this comes out as Neron Quesar or Nero Ceasar. And it totals 666. Now remember Nero’s legacy...no one else embodied evil and depravity more than he did...and so even though the current persecution is under Domitian, it is the same source of evil working in the same ways to devour God’s people through persecution...getting them to renounce their faith in Christ and give ownership of their soul to a false god.

Now if we take this understanding of the embodiment of evil who devours God’s world and we look at others, who left a legacy of destruction and evil just like Nero did, then we can say that even though John was speaking specifically about Nero, we have seen this beast in the names of Stalin, Hitler, Polpot, Pinochet.

John’s strategy in this book is to help his readers understand that although Rome looks very seductive, the culture around looks very enticing, it is really bankrupt. And it is going to be subject to judgment, it is not going to last...it will be destroyed. And he wants them to see that there are two empires that they can follow. They can follow God’s empire, the kingdom of God, or they can follow Satan’s empire, which in this particular setting was the Roman culture. Which will you choose?

And you can see this in the way John wrote the letter. Turn your bibles to chapter 4, and I will walk you through this...and I want you to see that John takes us back and forth, back and forth. In one scene we’re in the heavenly kingdom and the next scene is about the destruction that comes with Satan’s kingdom.

And he wants us to see the choice...which of these empires will we follow?

Chapters 4 & 5 are the heavenly kingdom...and it is a beautiful scene. Chapter 6 takes us back to earth and the agony associated with the earthly empire of satan. Chapter 7 is in heaven again, and chapters 8 & 9 are about the judgment that will come to satan’s earthly kingdom. Chapters 10-11 return to God’s kingdom in heaven, and Chapters 12 &13 are all

about the Roman empire, satan's empire on earth. Chapters 14 & 15 are a heavenly vision again and 16-18 tell us about the ultimate judgment on satan's empire and so on.

So back and forth the picture goes and John says, "pick one...which one will you choose." But by the time we've read his description of them, there really isn't much of a choice.

In God's empire, God receives worship. In satan's empire, he longs for worship, but must deceive and force people into giving it. In God's empire, his son is Jesus who is portrayed as a Lamb and a Lion. In satan's empire, his son is a grotesque beast. In God's empire, the inhabitants sing, there is joy. In satan's empire, the inhabitants wail and mourn and grieve. In God's empire there are blessings and healing. In satan's empire, there is judgment and misery. In God's kingdom the capital city is the new Jerusalem, a city of light and hope and peace. In satan's kingdom the capital city is Rome or Babylon, heading for destruction. God's capital city is described as a bride, satan's as a harlot.

The mark, the seal of ownership, from one of these empires will come with our choice. Which will it be? To whom do we belong?

In this world, we Christ followers have to walk that line of being in and engaged with our culture but not selling our souls to it. Jesus prayed for us, his followers of all ages in the gospel of John 17. And his prayer is that we would be in the world, but not of the world. We would be participants in our society, engaged in it, but not to give it our heart. John's warning in Revelation is that to accommodate to the culture to a point of worship is clearly over that line.

I don't believe God wants us to look at everything in our world and start calling it "evil". But I do believe God wants us to be careful about that line. Crossing it for us in our world may look like greed, materialism or power. It may look like addiction to drugs or alcohol or violence, or pornography. Whatever it is, it's over the line when it becomes something we give our heart to, something we worship. That's when we have sold out.

The Good news is that God loves us and will forgive us. God desires to put his seal, his mark of his love and eternal friendship on our hearts. God desires to fill our hearts with his spirit, something that will fulfill beyond all other desires and that can never be stolen from us.

The good news is that there is nothing in Revelation to fear; not its judgment sections or its highly symbolic images. It was never intended to produce fear, only to remind us that we have a choice about the ultimate citizenship of our souls. So don't get too caught up in the "signs of the end of time" or the scare tactics that sometimes well-intended people use. The heart of the message is to be encouraged by our faith and remain true to the one who will never abandon or leave us. The good news is that there is nothing to fear, ever, when our heart is with God.