

Under Pressure

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[0 : 00] As we make our way through the last book of the Bible, we come to one of the easiest texts in the book to understand.

We do? Yes. Yes. The first readers of the text, the 13th chapter of the revelation of Jesus Christ, would have gotten the message right away.

Or maybe it's better to say they would have felt the message right away. Or better yet, they would have gotten the message right away about why they were feeling under pressure.

Under pressure. Under pressure to compromise. Under pressure to compromise their loyalty to Jesus as the true emperor and true God.

Remember, that is how Jesus portrayed himself in the seven messages to the seven churches.

Jesus intentionally crafted his seven messages to the seven churches to present himself as the true emperor and true God.

[1 : 33] In Revelation 13, Jesus now helps the disciples in 96 A.D. and disciples in 2013 A.D. understand the dynamics of the pressure they and we are under to compromise.

This text takes us to one of the fundamental practical issues every person faces every day. The issue of worship.

Who do we worship? We are the creatures who worship. It is automatic. We all worship. To be human is to be a worshiper.

It is not just a clever throwaway line when the media speak of the church of Oprah. Or the cathedral of higher education.

Or the religion of hockey. Just saying. We will witness this afternoon one of the most powerful worship services on the whole planet.

[2 : 48] When men elevated to godhood take the field in New Orleans in the Super Bowl. Just saying. Humans worship.

Humans worship. The issue every day and every moment is who will it be. Through Revelation 13, Jesus blows away the fog.

And helps us understand the pressure we are under to worship anything other than the true emperor and true God.

And through this text. Jesus puts the Lord's Supper. In a very different light.

If you are able. Would you please stand for the reading of the word of God. Revelation chapter 13. And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.

[3 : 57] And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads. With ten crowns on his horns. And on each head a blasphemous name.

The beast I saw resembled a leopard. But had feet like those of a bear. And a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.

One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound. But the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshipped the dragon.

Because he had given authority to the beast. And they also worshipped the beast. And asked. Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him? The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies.

And to exercise his authority for 42 months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God. And to slander his name and his dwelling place. And those who live in heaven.

[4 : 59] He was given power to make war against the saints. And to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, nation and language. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast.

All whose names have not been written in the book of life. Belonging to the lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. He who has an ear. Let him hear.

If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with a sword, with a sword he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

Then I saw another beast coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf.

And made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast. Whose fatal wound had been healed. And he performed great and miraculous signs. Even causing fire to come down from heaven to fall in full view of men.

[6 : 01] Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast. He deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them all to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived.

He was given power to take breath. To give breath to the image of the first beast. So that it would speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave.

To receive a mark on his right hand and on his forehead. So that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark. Which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom.

If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast. For it is a man's number. His number is 666. 666. Dear God.

Will you help us understand why you have bothered inspiring this chapter of your book? And will you protect us?

[7 : 09] In Jesus name. Amen. You may be seated. This is one of the easiest texts of the apocalypse of Jesus Christ to understand.

Yes, it is. And the first readers of the text would have gotten it relatively quickly. They would have seen and heard that they were under pressure to compromise their loyalty to Jesus from three forces at work in the world.

They were under pressure from forces portrayed as a dragon, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the earth. And a beast from the earth. They were under pressure from a kind of trinity.

A counterfeit trinity. A dragon, a beast from the earth, sea, and a beast from the earth. And so were we. We are under pressure, usually very subtle, but very real, from the dragon, the arch enemy of Jesus who hates Jesus.

And from the dragon's two agents in the world. Dragon manipulated political power, the sea beast. And dragon manipulated religious power, the earth beast.

[8 : 28] How do we know this? How do we know that this is the message of Revelation 13?

Review. In the chapter before this text, in Revelation 12, in the theological center of the whole book, we meet a dragon, a child, and a woman.

The woman gives birth to the male child who says John is to rule the world. As the woman delivers the child, the dragon tries to kill the child.

But the child is lifted up by God to his throne. The child is born and then lifted up. His whole life, his whole career, collapsed to, born and lifted up.

Because the ultimate purpose of this child being born into the world is to be installed on the throne of the universe as king of kings and lord of lords. This child is the true emperor and the true God.

And the dragon is furious. Understatement. Since he is thwarted in his attempt to kill the child, he goes after the woman. But the woman is taken to a safe place.

[9 : 34] And so, in his rage, the dragon goes after the other offspring of the woman, as John puts it. He goes after the disciples of the child. He goes after the followers of Jesus.

If the dragon cannot destroy Jesus, it will try to destroy those whom Jesus loves. But, the dragon does not do this directly.

If the dragon did it directly, it would be easy to stand. So, Revelation 13. The dragon does his work in the world through two agents.

Two agents portrayed as beasts. One from the sea, one from the earth. And the first readers of Revelation 13 would have quickly realized what all this imagery and symbolism was portraying.

The beast from the sea is political power manipulated by the dragon. And the beast from the earth is religious power manipulated by the dragon. And how do we know this?

[10:39] Not that all political powers are manipulated by the dragon. And not that all religious power is manipulated by the dragon. It's just that in the quest for power, political powers become vulnerable to the dragon's offer of power.

It's just that in the quest for relevance, in the quest to make a mark in the world, religious powers become vulnerable to the dragon's offer of power.

The beast from the sea is Jesus' portrayal of political powers under the influence of and empowered by Jesus' enemy. And how do we know this?

In the book of Job, we read about two great beasts. Leviathan, the sea monster, and Behemoth, the earth monster. And we meet these monsters throughout the Old Testament.

They regularly represent evil forces that are seeking to destroy God's good creation. And they regularly represent evil empires oppressing God's people.

[12:01] In the book of Daniel, we read about a dream the prophet had in the first year of Belshazzar, king of Babylon. Daniel says in the dream that he saw four great beasts coming up from the sea.

Same language John uses in verse 1 of Revelation 13. The first beast, says Daniel, was like a lion.

The second like a bear. The third like a leper. And the fourth he was unable to describe.

And as the dream unfolds, it becomes very clear that these four beasts represent four human kingdoms. Each rejecting the claims of the living God.

Each seeking to live independently of God. John describes the beast from the sea using this language from Daniel. 13.2.

Like a leper. His feet were like those of a bear. His mouth was like that of a lion. Leper, lion, bear.

Those are the first three beasts that Daniel sees. Now, is John saying then that the beast from the sea is this fourth beast Daniel saw, which he could not describe?

[13:07] Or is John saying that the beast from the sea is all four of Daniel's beasts wrapped into one? That each of the kingdoms Daniel saw was but a particular manifestation of the beast from the sea?

That the beast from the sea manifested itself in each of these other kingdoms and by implication will manifest itself in other kingdoms? I think so. The beast from the sea is human kingdoms in any era that leave the living God out of the center of its common life.

In John's day, that beast was Rome. Before that, it was Egypt, Syria, Babylon. And after John's day, it gets manifested in other empires.

And Revelation 13 tells us how the beast became beastie. Beastiness emerges out of blasphemy. Out of misplaced worship. Political powers do not set out to be beastie. They set out to be their own master.

[14:34] And in the process, turn beastie to retain their power. When political powers set out to be their own gods, they do not become divine.

They become less than human and sometimes even demonic. Need I illustrate? John saw this happening in his day.

He saw it taking place in Rome. Rome did not set out to be beastie. Rome didn't even set out to be God either.

But it slowly moved in that direction. First creating gods in its own image. And then slowly beginning to worship these images.

Revelation 13, 4. Worship. Verse 4. Worship. Verse 8. Worship. Verse 15. Worship. John is telling us that powers that move out from being under God began to play God.

[15:44] And slowly demand allegiance. Absolute allegiance. In 29 BC, the emperor Augustus allowed a temple in his honor to be built in the city of Pergamum.

One of the seven churches to which the apocalypse of Jesus Christ was sent. By the end of Augustus reign, which is about 14 AD, worship of the emperor was now taking place in 34 more cities.

Augustus' successor, Tiberius, continued this trend. And so did his successor, Caligula, who insisted that he be acknowledged as divine.

Claudius was more moderate, although he tolerated this blasphemy. From 54 to 68 AD, Nero took this even further.

But it was Domitian. It was Domitian who in 96 AD took it to extremes. He had a gigantic temple built to his honor in the city of Ephesus.

[16:52] Another city that receives the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. And Domitian demanded that the whole world treat him as God. That he be addressed as Domini et Deus, as Lord and God.

You know, big photographs, life-size photographs put on billboards all over the city. And military parades with all the soldiers bowing down to the Great One.

You get the picture. One of Domitian's circular letters to the empire even begins, Our master and our God bids.

Now why did this happen? The dragon. John wants the followers of Jesus in his day to realize that in Augustus and Tiberius and Nero's and Domitian's quest for power, for absolute power, they fell prey to the dragon and began to act dragonishly.

The state became an agent of the enemy of Jesus. Now how does what John sees square with what Paul sees?

[18:05] That is, how does Revelation 13 square with Romans 13? If you know the book of Romans, you know that in Romans 13, Paul calls political power on earth the servant of God.

Twice he calls the political power of the ministers of God. Now is John here now contradicting Paul?

No. Paul writes under the administration of Claudius, who played down the emperor worship.

He allowed it, but he played it down. John writes under the administration of Domitian, who demands worship. In just a few years, the servant of God in Romans 13 moved out from under its God-ordained role and became the servant of the dragon in Revelation 13.

The pattern has been repeated over and over again. Political powers manipulated by the dragon.

Now John sees one of the heads of the beast, verse 3, suffer a mortal wound and then be healed.

This is a clear act of counterfeit. The beast is trying to imitate Jesus. The same language used of Jesus earlier in the book is now being used of this beast.

[19:26] Chapter 5, I saw a lamb standing as if slain. Chapter 13, I saw one of the beast's heads as if slain. Chapter 5, the lamb purchases men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Chapter 13, the beast seeks to exercise authority over every tribe and tongue and people and nation. Chapter 5, the whole universe worships the lamb. Chapter 13, The earth worships the dragon and the beast.

This mimicking of Jesus actually took place in John's day. You might know that Nero committed suicide when he was 32 years old.

And a rumor soon spread that he had not actually died but actually had been whisked to an island where he then recovered from this suicide attempt. He did die and he did not return.

But the rumor took on mythic proportions. Not hard to imagine. Think Elvis Presley. Think JFK. And power hungry politicians exploited the myth.

[20:37] Nero imposters emerged all over the empire. The emperor Otho was reported to actually call himself Nero and he would frequently sign his documents Nero.

But note, John does not say that the head that was wounded came back to life. He says the beast came back to life. Head is a way of saying king.

The beast has seven heads. That means this empire has seven kings. Rome, seven hills. One king is killed but the kingdom continues.

Which is why John records people crying out in verse 4. Who is like the beast? Who is able to wage war with him? The beast is very resilient.

Just when one form of his reign is overcome another form of his reign will rear its head. Who is able to wage war with him? The implication being since this dragon-like empire keeps emerging since the beast keeps coming back from defeat.

[21:44] Why not face reality and simply compromise with such power? And the beast of the earth? It too mimics.

He uses the power to mimic to deceive people through signs and wonders. John says, verse 13, that he mimics the signs given to Moses. Great signs.

He mimics the signs work through Elijah even calling fire down from heaven. And why does the earth beast perform these signs? That's the key question. Why does the earth beast perform these signs?

To induce people to worship the sea beast. The role of the beast from the earth is to do whatever it takes to get people to put their trust in political power that has moved out from being under God.

John says that the beast, verse 11, has two horns like a lamb but he has the voice of a dragon. He's mimicking the lamb's horns.

[22 : 48] Horns are a sign of strength. This beast is very strong doing great signs. The second beast makes an image of the first beast. This second beast, whatever it is, is into image making.

It's into propaganda. Now note, verse 15, the second beast gives breath to the first beast.

The earth beast provides the spirit, the life force for the sea beast. And just as the lamb has put marks on his followers, so this beast puts marks on its followers.

As the lamb has sealed his followers, so this beast seals his followers. It makes it difficult to do business, to buy and sell, unless people have the mark on their forehead or on their right hand.

Not literally so, don't worry about that. The imagery is simply telling us that this beast can so influence the marketplace that unless we opt into the spirit and way of this beast, we will be left out.

[24 : 06] Do you see how this text is speaking to our world? I think you can then see that the beast from the earth is religious power or powers.

And John is telling the churches of Asia Minor that like the state, religion can also be manipulated by the dragon.

Which is why later in the drama, John calls this beast the false prophet. Jesus had warned his first band of disciples of such a possibility. Beware of false prophets, he said. Beware of religious propagandists, wolves in sheep clothing who induce people to worship power.

dragon manipulated religious power, inducing people to worship dragon manipulated political power.

Which is what was happening in the cities to which John sends the apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

Some historians argue that it is the religious authorities in John's day who are actually the strongest proponents of emperor worship.

[25 : 18] New Testament scholar George Caird goes as far to say it would have never occurred to Augustus to claim divinity if religious leaders had not raised the possibility. We know that there was this group of religious leaders called the commune of Asia.

The commune of Asia was made up of representatives from all the cities of Asia minor who had the responsibility of protecting the god or the gods of their city. We meet this group in the city of Ephesus in the book of Acts.

And over time they became in effect the high priesthood of the emperor cult. John says that this earth beast deceives people to worship the sea beast.

Members of this commune of Asia actually used trickery to encourage such worship. They would use pulleys behind curtains to make statues move.

and they learned the tricks of ventriloquism to make the statues talk. Is this why John says that the beast from the earth has two horns?

[26 : 28] If he's mimicking the lamb ought he not have seven horns? Why two horns? Because he's also mimicking the witness from Revelation 11. This beast is mimicking the witness to Jesus Christ.

He's mimicking the Holy Spirit who gives breath to the kingdom of God. But John exposes his defeatful ways in the text. Verse 14 The beast came to life.

He has a wound in his head but he comes to life. But note John does not say the beast was resurrected. Well that's a critical difference. Resurrection is a whole lot more than come to life.

Lazarus came to life. Jesus is resurrected. The beast can suffer defeat and bounce back in a new form but this beast does not have the capacity to resurrect itself and last forever.

Which helps us understand what 666 is all about. And I'll come to that in a moment. Under pressure. Under pressure to compromise.

[27 : 36] Under pressure to compromise our loyalty to Jesus as the true emperor and true God. The pressure comes from through both politics and religion.

But the pressure is not from politics and religion. They're just human. The pressure is from the dragon exercising authority through political and religious powers.

Now is this not what Jesus was facing all of his earthly career? If Revelation 12 is a Christmas Eve text, Revelation 13 is a life of Jesus text.

Jesus was under constant pressure to compromise his loyalty to his father. And the pressure came through political and religious powers, but the pressure was coming from the enemy.

Early in Jesus' ministry, it's very early, that he finds himself in trouble. Why does he get in trouble? Because of the kinds of things he is saying and doing. He's healing all kinds of diseases.

[28 : 41] He's freeing people from the grip of the demonic. He heals a paralytic and says your sins are forgiven. He heals a man who had a withered hand, but he does it on the Sabbath. And then we read in the gospel according to Mark, Mark 3, 6, listen to these words, listen.

Then the Pharisees went out to plot with the Herodians how they could kill Jesus. I remember being stunned the first time I read that text.

Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. I mean, the Pharisees hated the Herodians and the Herodians despised the Pharisees, but they come together in their common hatred of Jesus.

Religious powers joining with political powers, unwittingly falling into the power of the one who hates Jesus even more than they do. Am I making sense?

Then during Holy Week, we see all of this portrayed publicly. The religious powers and the political powers come together, not because they like each other, they don't like each other, but they both have to deal with the Jesus problem.

[29 : 55] You see, religion does not know what to do with Jesus. Politics does not know what to do with Jesus. The political powers in Good Friday actually want to see things work out.

They're a little more pragmatic. Let's see how things work out. Pilate actually wants to let Jesus go. But the religious powers pressure the political powers. Caiaphas pressures Pilate.

And then finally, they come together, both together, manipulated by the dragon to do what the dragon was unable to do when the child was first born.

Jesus himself came under this pressure from the dragon through the beasts from the sea and the beasts from the earth. And so do all those who follow Jesus.

We, too, come under that pressure. So, how do we stand under the pressure? That is, how do we overcome, to use the language of the last book of the Bible?

[30 : 56] In addition to all that we have learned so far, what does Revelation 13 teach us about how to stand? It teaches us three things. First, the text calls us to wake up.

Wake up. Verse 8. He who has an ear, let him hear. This is a repetition of that seven-fold exhortation when Jesus seven times says to the seven churches, the seven of Asia Minor, they who have an ear, hear.

The text is saying wake up to what is coming down in the world. Watch the news through Revelation 13 lenses. Read the news through Revelation 13 glasses.

Wake up. We are not living in a neutral universe. Second, the text calls us to watch. To watch the movements of our hearts.

In particular, to listen to our fears and watch where we put our trust when we are afraid.

[32 : 09] During the recent elections in the United States, I heard disciples of Jesus from both sides say things like, if he's not elected, the country is toast.

If he's elected, there's no future for the country. Unless he's elected, there's no hope. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

Religious people saying of political powers, he is our only hope? hope. That makes me think of what Caiaphas, the high priest, said to Pilate, the governor, on Good Friday.

Pilate had asked, should we crucify your king? And Caiaphas responds, we have no king but Caesar. Well, wait a minute, Caiaphas, you're the high priest of Israel.

What do you mean, no king but Caesar? what about Yahweh? Caiaphas, the religious leader, had fallen into the trap of thinking that the political leader had ultimate authority.

[33 : 26] The only hope for Israel, the only hope for America and for Canada and any other nation is Jesus. Jesus works with political powers and I think we're to do our best to raise up and elect people who, walk, who do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God.

But such powers are not our only hope. Jesus Christ is the only hope. And this text calls us to listen to our hearts when we're afraid and listen to what we say when we're afraid.

And third, the text calls us to worship. To worship the true emperor and the true God. The text reminds us we're all going to worship. That's a given.

We are all going to surrender to some power. And the question is which is it? The power of the dragon that wants to inflict hurt on people or the power of the lamb who will take the hurt to themselves.

So, 666. Boy, you know a lot of ink has been spilled around this. symbol. It's clearly a symbol. And many have tried to identify this symbol with some specific historical person.

[34 : 47] The tact that is taken is that in both Greek and Hebrew language, letters of the alphabet can serve as numbers. So, you could take the English language, A would be the number one, B would be the number two, C would be the number three, and so forth.

And so people have tried to find names of historical figures whose letters as numbers add up to 666. And you might know that Nero Caesar, the word Nero Caesar is said to come out 666.

Funny thing, you have to do a lot of tricks with his name, switch languages, and do all kinds of things to get 666. If you take Nero Caesar just on, as it is, it comes out 616.

Which would tell me not to take that tap. I agree with those who say that we are to treat 666 simply as a symbol for the nature of the earth beast.

The nature of religious power manipulated by the dragon. Six is one less than seven. Seven is the number of perfection. Six, therefore, is one less than perfection.

[36 : 01] Throughout the last book of the Bible, John refers to the Holy Spirit as the six spirits of God, seven spirits of God. That is to say that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, is perfect, is complete.

Six, the nature of the beast, one less than perfection. Six, six, regularly less than perfection. Six, six, six, six, always less than perfection.

The best the beast can do is six. The best that religion can do is six. The counterfeit trinity, the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, wants to be God, but the best it can do is six.

Maybe six, six, maybe six, six, six, always one less, one less, one less. As Saad Zarif put it last Sunday night in our discussion, always losing, always losing, always losing.

So why put your trust in that which is always losing and never measures up? Now, if you do want to take the tact and use letters of the alphabet to represent numbers and do the gematria as it's called with the name Jesus, in Greek it's Iesous, the name Jesus comes out eight, eight, eight.

[37 : 26] Ha! Six, six, six, never makes it, never makes it, never makes it, eight, eight, eight, always better than you expected, always better than you expected, always better than you expected.

Worship the one who alone is worthy no matter the cost. That's what the text says. So we come to the Lord's table.

A religious act and a political act. an act that heals religion and an act that heals politics.

It heals religion because it delivers us from religion. Religion saves no one. Only a person can save us. The Lamb who shed his blood for us and for the world.

And it heals politics by delivering us from false hopes. no political power can save us. Only a person can save us.

[38 : 29] The Lamb who because he shed his blood now sits on the throne above thrones. you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

In the midst of all this pressure to compromise the true emperor and the true God sets a table. Do this he says in remembrance of me.

I am your own hope.