

The Two Beasts

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 13 verse 1 to 14 verse 5. 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.

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 to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.

One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast.

And they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it? And the beast was given a mouth, uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.

It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

[1 : 17] And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, 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.

If anyone has an ear, let him hear. 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.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. 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.

It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people. And by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.

[2 : 29] And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak, and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.

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 unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.

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. Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000, who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

And I heard a voice from heaven, like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and before the elders.

No one could learn that song, except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.

[3 : 52] It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits from God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

Now, I guess it's rather tempting, isn't it, to think that that reading which we've just had from Revelation 13, with two beasts, a dragon, marks on people's foreheads, numbers, 666, the 144,000, is really taken from the world of make-believe.

It sounds more sort of Harry Potter than anything else. But in a sense, of course, that is the temptation we face every Sunday when we come to church, and every time we read the Bible.

Let me put it on this. You see, where do you look for your understanding of reality and how the world works? It's very easy, isn't it, to imagine that Sunday morning at church is some kind of parallel universe where we sing about Jesus, we listen to a talk from the Bible, and then it's on Monday morning, on Monday morning, that I really go and learn about real life and engage with as a real reality, things as they really are.

But the opposite is, in fact, the case. The Bible helps us to see and understand reality. It helps us to make sense of our lives.

[5 : 19] Because as we were reminded last week, life doesn't simply happen at the horizontal level, so to speak, in terms of stuff that we can see. There is also a vertical dimension to life as well, because we live in a world that God has created and over which Jesus Christ is Lord.

Lord. Now, just to illustrate this for a moment, I'm going to pick on everyone in the room who's got glasses. Okay? So you've got glasses. Will you please just take them off for a moment?

Now, I don't know what you can now see, but for me, everything is kind of rather blurry and unclear, and I can see the splotches of color around the place, and that's about it.

Just as our spiritual sight is naturally blurry and distorted by sin. Well, now put your glasses back on again.

Because that is what the Bible does for us. It brings clarity and clear-sightedness to our lives and the world in which we live.

[6 : 27] And that is true for all of us, whether we're followers of Jesus Christ already, or whether we're simply looking in on Christian things. And today, the risen Lord Jesus wants us to be clear about Satan's tactics.

I guess we all know, don't we, the importance of tactics. Just think of the British Olympic team as they head off to Tokyo and get ready for that. I imagine it's all they're talking about, tactics.

Or in the world of business, you want to know your competitors' tactics so you can outmaneuver them. Or obviously, in the world of warfare, the importance of good tactics to outwit the enemy.

And here in Revelation chapter 13, we're introduced to two beasts who, between them, reveal the tactics of Satan as he makes war on the church.

You'll remember last week in chapter 12, we saw that Satan is defeated and yet furious. And so, in his rage, he makes war on those who belong to Jesus.

[7 : 35] We'll look at each beast in turn. As always, it's a great help if you can bring a physical Bible to church just to make it easier to follow. Firstly then, the beast from the sea, political oppression.

The beast from the sea stands for political oppression. Have a look at verses 1 and 2. Here then is a beast of great power, symbolized by ten horns.

Here then is a beast of great power, symbolized by ten horns, each one with a diadem or a crown on its head.

And seven heads, each with a blasphemous name on it. In other words, standing in opposition to God. Now, I said last week that lots of people get confused by these symbols and the picture language of Revelation.

And yet, the key to it is always in the Old Testament, the key to understanding the symbolism. So, I put Daniel chapter 7 on the outline.

[8 : 57] Don't look it up now. But it would be great later on in the day to read the whole of Daniel chapter 7. Because in these three verses, verses 4 to 6, we see a series of four beasts.

Not one, but four beasts all come out of the sea. The first, we're told, looks like a lion. The second, like a bear. The third looks like a leopard. And the fourth, we're told, is terrifying and strong.

They represent political power. The succession of great empires that will rule the Roman world. The Babylonian Empire, followed by the Persian Empire, followed by the Greek Empire, followed by the most terrifying and strong of all, the Roman Empire.

Now, here in Revelation 13, we have one beast, not four. And it's a combination of all of them. And notice that at the end of verse 2, the dragon, that's Satan, gives his power and authority to it.

It is meant to be a terrifying picture of political power and oppression orchestrated by Satan and directed against God's people.

[10 : 16] And just like the dragon last week, so in verse 3, the beast, notice, is mortally wounded. Mortally wounded. And yet, won't die yet.

Its mortal wound is healed. Yes, the death of Jesus on the cross means that Satan, the accuser, is defeated. And yet, he continues to make war on the church.

In fact, he seems just as powerful as before. Notice, too, that in verse 4, the beast is worshipped. And they worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast.

And they worshipped the beast, saying, who is like the beast and who can fight against it? People love strong rulers. They vote for powerful leaders.

Germany voted for Hitler. And then in verses 5 to 7, we see the scope of the beast's power. In verse 5, the period of 42 months elsewhere, it's described as three and a half years in Revelation and 1,260 days.

[11 : 25] It's all the same period of time. It's the period of time between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and his return at the end of history. In other words, this beast is allowed to exercise its power until Jesus returns.

And verse 7, notice, to do so over the whole earth, over every tribe and people and language and nation. Now, I said last week that one of our problems reading these chapters of Revelation about Satan's war on the church is it can just seem, God, it's so far removed from my life and from what we experience.

And yet, the letter to the seven churches at the beginning of Revelation gives us a glimpse of what political oppression at the hands of Satan looks like on the ground.

So please keep a finger in Revelation 13 and turn back to chapter 2. Revelation 2, verses 12 and 13.

Revelation 2, verses 12 and 13. And this is the letter to the church in Pergamum. Like all these seven churches in Revelation, Pergamum is in the Roman province of Asia, today western Turkey.

- [12 : 54] Have a look at verses 12 and 13. And to the angel of the church in Pergamum writes, The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. Now, Pergamum was the city from where the Roman Empire governed the whole province of Asia.

It was the seat of political power. No wonder it's described as the place where Satan has his throne. It seems that one member of the church, Antipas, has been killed for being a witness.

A witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord and not the Roman Emperor. But it's a mistake to limit our beast in Revelation 13 to one particular political regime.

Because remember, it's given authority over the whole world for all time until Jesus returns. So, you might think of France persecuting the Huguenots in the 17th century.

You might think of the Soviet Union persecuting Christians. Or ISIS in the Islamic State killing Christians. Or China, as we were reminded just now by Adrian.

- [14 : 26] There was an interview with a Chinese church leader last week on the radio, explaining that the Chinese, the Communist Party, is perfectly happy for people to be Christians as long as they put the state first.

This man said, we tell them that we love China, that we love God more. Now, it's fair to say that as Christians living in the UK, we don't experience state oppression at the moment.

Although Christians have done in the past. And there's no reason why we shouldn't do so again in the future. And yet, I think it's fair to say, isn't it, that we do feel the squeeze of the state.

So, a street preacher recently arrested. Yes, he was later released with an apology from the police. But it creates, doesn't it, a climate of fear. What am I allowed to say? What aren't I allowed to say?

A Christian organization banned by a local council from using a public building. Yes, the council's decision was overturned in a court case. But again, it creates a climate. A climate of harassment.

- [15 : 38] Might the day come when certain professions even, perhaps working in the NHS or teachers, might be excluded. The Christians might be excluded from those professions because they won't sign up to the state's ideology on ethics or inclusion.

What's the application? Have a look at verse 9. Chapter 13, verse 9. If anyone has an ear, let him hear.

Don't be naive. Take this seriously. And be prepared for casualties. Verse 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. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. This is warfare.

Christian villages in Nigeria will be attacked. People will be killed. And here in the UK, we shouldn't assume that churches will remain faithful under pressure from the state, from an increasingly post-Christian state.

- [16 : 52] No, we need endurance. Whatever may come our way. Let's move on and think about the second beast.

The beast from the earth. False religion. Have a look at verse 11. Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth.

It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. Now, this beast couldn't look more different. It looks like a lamb.

In Revelation, it's Jesus, of course, who is the lamb. The one who's died a sacrificial death for the forgiveness of sins so that those who trust in him can be at peace with God.

And this beast looks just like him. So who would ever guess that he's out to get you? Until, that is, he speaks.

[17 : 54] Because he speaks with the voice of the dragon of Satan. I guess we're meant to imagine an episode of the TV series *Faking It* that was on some time ago.

You know, rather than a vicar who fakes it as a second-hand car dealer or a kickboxer who fakes it as a ballroom dancer, here is Satan faking it as Jesus. Satan the deceiver who deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Did God really say? Just as here in verse 14, this second beast is described as deceiving those who dwell on the earth.

Indeed, notice verse 13. It performs great signs, just like Moses in the Old Testament in front of Pharaoh. It even makes fire come down from heaven, just like the prophet Elijah. Spiritual power and impressiveness is no guarantee of spiritual truth.

Indeed, later on in Revelation, this second beast is called the false prophet, confirming that it is a picture of false religion and false teaching.

[19 : 08] And once again, it's earthed in the day-to-day lives of the seven churches at the start of the book. So turn back once again to Revelation chapter 2.

Revelation chapter 2, verses 9 to 10, and the church in Smyrna. I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich, and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

How is Satan at work through the beast of false religion in Smyrna? Well, it's the opposition they're facing from the Jewish synagogue, perhaps bringing slanderous accusations against Christians who are about to be thrown into prison.

Now, for me, I think one of the most alarming examples of the deceptive power of this second beast was the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle three years ago.

[20 : 37] The preacher was Michael Curry, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the United States. His energetic sermon on the power of love completely upstaged the royal couple.

What a breath of fresh air everyone was saying. And Christians, it seems, joined in the praise, or at least many did, how wonderful people were saying to have the gospel preached on such an occasion.

And yet his words were deceptive. They disguised his true character. Revealed by his actions at home, as he persecutes churches who hold to the teaching of the Bible, removes them from their buildings, and forces their leaders, even fellow bishops, to resign.

He's a messenger of the beast, looking like the lamb, just as all false teaching and false religion is. But notice, too, back in chapter 13, that this second beast also works in collusion with the first.

Did you notice that? Verse 12, it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beasts. And in verse 14, it deceives people into making an image of the first beast and worshipping it.

[22 : 00] Now, in the first century, the Roman state was woven together with the worship of Roman gods and deities. just as in many countries today, the state seeks to use religion for its own ends.

It's why in verses 16 and 17, those who don't worship the beast are marginalized economically. Verse 16, 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 unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.

You will know that in many Muslim countries, if you're not a Muslim, then you are regarded as a second-class citizen. You have to pay the jizya tax as protection money.

The best jobs and opportunities are not available to you. Or again, think of China. Churches are required to remove crosses from their buildings and to remove the Ten Commandments from the inside of their church buildings and replace them with Communist Party slogans.

While here in the UK, where the Church of England is the state church, it will always be vulnerable to this kind of collaboration with the state.

[23 : 28] It's why we need to pray for our leaders and bishops that they don't seek to preserve their status and privileges at the expense of being faithful to Jesus Christ.

Well, what's the application of this second point? Well, verse 18. This calls for wisdom. Of course it does. Discernment is what we need because it will be hard to spot.

In other words, there won't be a picture of a red dragon holding a pitchfork up on their stained glass window or on their website logo. But be assured, it is the enemy.

Hence the number in verse 18. Six, six, six. Now, much ink has been spilt on its meaning.

Many people imagining it some kind of secret code that needs to be cracked and interpreted. Much more likely, I think, is that in verse 18, John, as he writes, is simply asking us as readers what would be a good number for this beast?

[24 : 45] If you were to give it a number, what would be a good number to give it? In Hebrew thought, the number seven is the number of perfection.

So a Trinitarian God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, well, you would represent it seven, seven, seven. So what number would you give to a beast which tries to imitate the real God and yet fails?

Well, six, six, six would be a good fit. thirdly, the perspective of heaven and victory.

Chapter 14, verses one to five. Now, when England play football against Germany on Tuesday, you won't necessarily be able to tell who is winning simply by watching the events on the pitch.

Yeah, as both sides battle it out, sometimes gaining ground, sometimes having possession or not, perhaps someone being injured, someone else being sent off or a penalty here.

[25 : 57] But look up and your ears, tune your ears to the roar of the crowd and without even looking at the scoreboards, you'll be able to know which side is winning.

because it will be those who are singing the most loudly. And it's just the same in the spiritual realm. Look at events around us, what's going on in the world.

Look at the spiritual battle as Satan makes war on the church and you wouldn't know, would you, that Jesus has won. You wouldn't know that Christians are on the winning side. But listen to the crowds in heaven and things look very different.

Look at verses one to three. Then I looked and behold on Mount Zion stood the Lamb and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.

[27 : 08] No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who would be redeemed from the earth. Now this is what is happening in heaven at exactly the same time as the events in chapter 13 that we've just seen on earth.

The 144,000, not a literal figure as the Jehovah's Witnesses claim, they're the complete number of God's people. They are those, verse 3, who have been redeemed through the death of Jesus on the cross.

And they've been faithful. That is the point of verse 4. Verse 4 is a slightly odd verse, isn't it? It's not saying they haven't had sex. Rather, as so often in the Bible, adultery is a picture of going after other gods.

But they haven't done that. And instead, at the end of verse 4, as it's made clear, they follow the Lamb wherever he goes. And the point is they are all here.

We are first introduced to this 144,000 back in chapter 7, and I wonder how many we might expect to be left after Satan's war on the church in chapters 12 and 13.

[28 : 23] Perhaps 100,000. Perhaps just 70,000. But no, they're still there. Each one of them. And they're singing.

They're singing the same song that they sing throughout Revelation of Jesus' victory. You see, what's being described here in Revelation chapter 14, it's not some far distant future.

It's the present. It's the present spiritual reality of the church. So you just think for a moment, what is happening as Grace Church Dulwich gathers every week on a Sunday morning?

We meet for an hour, we sing some songs, we say some prayers, we hear the Bible being read, we listen to a sermon. I mean, is that it? Might we not have better things to do with our time on a Sunday morning?

Why keep coming? Well, to remind ourselves that we are part of this heavenly gathering if we put our trust in Jesus, even as we're surrounded by Satan and the beasts and their forces.

[29 : 43] In just the same way that as people watch the match on Tuesday, perhaps gathered in groups up and down the country in homes or in pubs, they will do so because they want to be part of the far greater reality of what is happening in Wembley.

So can we begin to see what is really happening as we meet here each week, Sunday by Sunday? What is happening in the spiritual dimension, if you like, that we cannot see with our physical eyes?

We've come to the heavenly city where God dwells. We're joining in with Jesus and all those who belong to him as we proclaim his victory to one another in words and songs.

And it's not the words of a pastor we listen to, but the words of Jesus himself. In other words, this hour or so each week, far from being the world of unreality, is actually the thing that should shape the other 167 hours of the week.

It's why those who belong to Jesus will follow the lamb wherever he goes, willing to endure political oppression, wise to the reality of false teaching, because Jesus has won, and those who belong to him are on the winning side.

[31 : 10] Let me lead us in prayer. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

This calls for wisdom. Heavenly Father, we thank you that in your great kindness, you help us to see the spiritual dimension to our world that we cannot see ourselves with our own eyes.

Thank you for the way which you show us that we are in a spiritual battle, and we pray that in the face of it, please would you help us as a church to endure and to be wise and to stand firm.

and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.