

Conquering by being Conquered

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Date: 15 January 2017

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, thank you for the great privilege of being able to see through your eyes and from the perspective of heaven. We ask now that you would help us to look at our own lives and the lives of those around us through the perspective of heaven.

And we pray that that would continue to change us so that we might be like the Lord Jesus himself. And we ask this in his name. Amen.

Please sit down. Revelation chapter 13. If you just tear that page out in your Bible.

Were you feeling like I was kind of... I think there ought to be danger pay for Sunday school workers. Now, Revelation 13, page 1035.

We come to one of the most badly abused verses in all the Bible. It's the last verse in the chapter. I thought this is as good a way as any into the chapter.

[1 : 14] It says, verse 18, This calls for wisdom. Absolutely. Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast. For it's the number of a man and his number is 666.

Now, I don't know if you're aware or not, but there's more written on this verse than there is on all of the rest of Revelation put together. And a lot of it lacks wisdom.

And particularly over the last 150 years, there's been a fixation with the idea that this is speaking about one particular man.

And we identify him by this number 666. And so for the first time in Revelation, it looks like we're being encouraged to get out the calculator and figure out a puzzle.

Because if you substitute numbers for letters, you know, one for A, two for B, and then you translate it through a couple of different languages, you know what you get?

[2 : 18] Almost every name there is, you can make it up to 666. And over the last hundred years or so, here are some of the contenders.

The Pope, of course, different popes, Martin Luther. Never. Nero, Ronald Reagan, Hitler, Mao Zedong, George Bush, Bill Clinton, Tiger Woods, Billy Graham.

Do I need to go on? Now, apart from the fact, I mean, I thought what Jeremy did was very clever because, you see, if you take Revelation literally, you're going to end up sort of with paper in your mouth.

Feels like Christmas again. This would be the first number in the book of Revelation that was not symbolic. And if those of you have got glasses, if you look down, there's a little footnote next to 666. And the footnote reads, someone read it for me. Some manuscripts have 616. In the Greek, it literally reads, this calls for wisdom, for it is, it's literally, it is a human number.

[3 : 38] It's not trying to say it's one particular person. And the number is 666. And all the way through Revelation, we've seen there are numbers for God. Three, holy, holy, holy.

And seven, seven particularly, God created in seven days, seven spirits of God before the throne. So 666 is a cheap wannabe counterfeit for God.

It's the best humans can do when trying to play God. It's a bit God-like, but it never quite gets there. It's six, but it's not seven. It's six, but it's not seven.

Not quite God, not quite God, not quite God. Very important because chapter 13 is all about the exercise of human power and how Satan works through the details of this and how we as Christians get caught up in it.

Hence the call for wisdom. But at one level, chapter 13 is very simple. It's about two monsters. One rises from the sea. One comes from the earth.

[4 : 42] The one from the sea has crushing authority. The one from the earth has deceptive authority. And their job is to make every human bow down before themselves.

And they specially target followers of Jesus Christ, whom they kill. And then each half finishes with a call. The call in verse 10 for endurance and faith and the call in verse 18 for wisdom. And it's intensely practical. It's about the world that you and I live in, seen from heaven. And because this is our first week back in Revelation, for a little break, I want to say two things by way of orientation to the passage.

The first is that most of the symbols come from the Old Testament. And we know that these beasts from the Old Testament, particularly the book of Daniel, are a picture of political, economic and military power.

In Daniel, there are four separate beasts. And here, the beast from the sea is all rolled into one grotesque beast that targets Christians. And that's difficult for us as Christians.

[5 : 51] Because the Bible also teaches that governments and rulers and authorities are put there by God himself to punish evil and to reward good. And every week, don't we pray for those in authority over us?

And our posture as Christians is one of humility and serving and supporting and engaging. And we do that because of our allegiance to Jesus Christ. And we do that because of our Christians, that's the beast, the beast from the sea.

So that's the first thing to say. The second is that we have to put chapter 13 back into its context in the book of Revelation. And the context is chapter 11 to 15, which is all about the fact that the church is placed in the world to witness to Jesus Christ.

Do you remember chapter 11, the story of two witnesses? And the witnesses for a while were completely successful, powerful, indestructible.

And then for another little time, they are seen completely powerless. They're killed. Their bodies are violated until God takes them to be with him. And do you remember we saw this describes the experience of the church in the world all the time.

[7 : 33] Both of these things happen at the same time. Sometimes they happen in the same place. Do you know where on the planet today the Christian church is growing fastest?

It is the country of Iran. I only discovered this a day or two ago. The Iranian revolution, you remember in 1979, kicked out all missionaries, began decades of Christian persecution, which continues today.

Bibles were made illegal, evangelism outlawed. Pastors were rounded up and arrested, including Pastor Shafgat. Many were killed. Some feared that Christianity would die out.

But in the last 20 years, more Iranians have come to faith in Jesus Christ than in the 13 centuries since Islam first came to Iran.

In 1979, Westerners calculated there were 500 Christians in Iran from Muslim backgrounds. Today, the estimate is over a million.

[8 : 38] Both things are happening at the same time. Since the US presidential election most recently, there's been a lot of soul searching amongst American commentators seeking self-understanding.

This month's Atlantic, the editor's note, focuses on Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement. You know, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.

I wonder if you believe that. Do you think that's true? Do you think it was ever true? Or is history just indifferent? Well, chapter 12 tells us something about history and what's going on in the world we would not know anywhere else.

You remember the gruesome story of the dragon who wants to eat a woman in labor and the child she is to deliver. And the dragon is called the serpent, Satan, the ancient deceiver.

And the child is Jesus and the woman is the church. And Satan fails, you remember. And so the last verse of chapter 12 says this, if you just look at it back, verse 17.

[9 : 43] Then the dragon, that's Satan, became furious with the woman, that's the church, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

And he stood on the sand of the sea. So chapter 12 finishes with Satan wanting to make war on the church. And chapter 13 is answering the question, how does he make war on the church?

And the answer chapter 13 gives us is through the use of human power and through the use of human religion. The dragon works basically in chapter 13 to hide behind these two things.

He tries to become invisible. This is the way Satan works. Instead of an open frontal assault on the people of God or his people, he uses two beasts, two agents.

And one is human-centered power and the other is human-centered ideology or religion. And I just want to look at those two things briefly and what this text tells us. The first beast, the beast from the sea, is all about the worship of power.

[10:53] The worship of power. He's all about power. He comes out of the sea, you see, in verse 1 of chapter 13. And the sea is the roiling human nations of the world, we find out later.

He's got ten horns and ten crowns and seven heads. He's got an animal body which is fierce and fast. And he crushes all in his path with power and authority, making blasphemous boasts against God.

And all the world seems to bow down before him and worship him except Christians. And you can't miss this. What it is they worship is not the beauty and loveliness and positive contribution of the beast, but it's simply his power.

If you look at the end of verse 4. Who is like the beast they sing and who can fight against it? It's not joy and gladness and something good.

It's that you can't beat the beast so you might as well bow down and worship him. And that is exactly how power works in our world, isn't it? We want to be on the winning side. We don't want to be on the losing side.

[11:59] We don't like weakness. So something comes along and it looks like it's unstoppable and powerful and we want to join up. From the biggest bully at school to petty tyrants and despots.

From capricious collectives to multinational companies, from Afghanistan to Zambia. It's power that is worshipped. And you see, the institutions of life in which we live are both the good gift of God and can also be the embodiment of Satan's work.

Satan can hide in those things as well. Think about the institution of education. I mean, schools can be wonderful places of encouragement and growing creativity for children.

But they can also be places of indoctrination where the ideology of the beast is taught to children.

The financial institutions that we all engage with, they enable people to build homes and plan for families and do good things.

But they can be deeply corrupt and deeply corrupting, not just because of the money that they spend, but by the fact that they stimulate our greed. And Satan hides there too.

[13:14] Churches and denominations can be beautiful expressions of the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And they can also be fiefdoms for frustrated despots.

Churches can use and abuse people because of the ego of the leaders. And when we look carefully, Satan stands behind it. Wherever human power sets itself up against God, and it usually does so under the guise of some utopian dream, that power will become increasingly oppressive. Satan stands behind it. And it's amazing the resilience of different political systems. I mean, it doesn't matter whether it's left or right, communism or fascism.

It looks like one of those will receive a mortal blow, and then it springs back up almost miraculously, and more people bow down and worship. Now, this is so helpful, painfully, acutely helpful to the people to whom this was first addressed.

Do you know, we have a letter from the governor of the area where this letter went, about 15, 20 years after the letter, writing to the emperor saying, what am I going to do with these Christians?

[14:26] They're emptying out the Roman temples. They're a minority, but what do I do with them? And here I quote from the letter. His name is Pliny. He says, I interrogated some of these Christians to see whether they were Christians.

Those who confessed, I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment. And those who persisted, I ordered executed. And then he offered them a way out.

He said, curse Christ and offer incense to the image of emperor as Lord and God. And he said, I tried this with a couple of deaconesses, a couple of women.

And I tortured them, and all I got out of them was more superstition. And the emperor writes back and says, you're doing a very fine job. Do you think it's helpful for them to know about this beast? Do you think it's helpful for our brothers and sisters in Syria, who over the last years have faced the most gruesome deaths, deny Christ or be crucified, and thousands have been crucified?

[15:29] And I think what makes it even more difficult for us is that every one of the seven letters at the beginning of the book of Revelation finished with the call from God to conquer, to the one

who conquers, I'll give life.

But what happens when we don't conquer? What happens when we are conquered? Look at verse 7. The beast was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

Authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on the earth 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.

It's very important there's a shift here, because you can look at things from a human point of view, and it does look like we're conquered. And, you know, from a Healy point of view, what's happening is just a tragedy.

And the great temptation for Christians when they face this kind of pressure is just, it's either to give up or to fight back. If you take away the throne of God, if you take away the power of the Lamb, things look pretty grim.

[16:40] But there is this sense, even in the first beast, that God remains sovereign over the beast and the dragon. Four times we get this repeated call, the repeated idea that the beast is only allowed to make war.

He's only allowed to do what he does. And nothing takes place outside of his control. And there's also a limitation of time. But I want to leave it there and come back to this at the end of the sermon. I want to leave the worship of power and turn to the second beast, because I think this is even more important for us. We turn from the worship of power to the power of worship. Because the second beast works very closely with the first.

In verses 11 to 18, here's the department of propaganda. He is the ministry of information. And his focus is not power, but worship.

And what he does is he manufactures lies so that all of us will worship power. And so we're moving from the external exercise of power to the world of ideas and ideology, to the interior world of our hearts and minds, where we're being seduced by lies.

[17:54] And the core lie of the beast from the earth, the second beast, is to get us to think that it's a good thing to exchange the glory of the immortal God for the glory of something else.

So just look at the verses. The first thing he does in verse 11 is he dresses up like a lamb. He makes himself look a little bit like Jesus. But his words, we're told in verse 11, are the words of a dragon.

And in verse 14, he deceives those who dwell on the earth because he preaches the gospel of power telling us that we should make an image of the beast.

Now, let me just, let's just think about this. You see, Satan will not let you alone to quietly worship the lamb. He doesn't tolerate dissent.

And the work of the second beast is ideology. And did you notice that in verse 17 and 18, his work is particularly tied to our economic life?

[18:58] He wants us to know he owns the marketplace and that we only participate in the marketplace on his terms. Unless we have his mark and pay him some allegiance, we can kiss the marketplace goodbye.

That's why I think it's just as easy to bow down to the image of liberal capitalism as it is to communism or fascism or any other ism.

C.S. Lewis, who's a very helpful Christian writer, says that the devils encourage democracy. He says, and I quote, democracy leads to a nation without great men.

Great men and women. A nation mainly of subliterates, full of cockshawness, which flattery breeds on ignorance, quick to snarl or whimper at the first sign of criticism.

That's what hell wishes every democratic people to be. He says, we've got to picture hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance and everyone lives with a deadly serious passion of envy, self-importance and resentment.

[20:08] The reason I think this is helpful is because it's harder to see the second beast than it is the first. It's harder to be truthful with ourselves about where our true allegiance lies, particularly in a wealthy society.

And I think this is where 666 is so helpful to us because we need wisdom to see through human-centered ideology, human-centered religion, particularly, I think, when it arises in the church.

And one of the fastest growing works of the second beast in the world today is what is known as the prosperity gospel. This is a parasite on the true gospel. It's a perfect example of a me-centered, human-centered religion, and it has 666 written all over it.

The prosperity gospel takes the abundant life that Jesus came to bring and defines it as financial, physical, wealth, and health, and a happy lifestyle, the one that's pictured in advertising campaigns. And there's this subtle shift that happens where God does for me like a giant spiritual ATM, and I just need to pull the right levers in my life of faith, and God will jump and do what I want.

[21 : 26] You see, it has to do with your expectation of life. There are crassly selfish forms of this, and there are subtle Anglican forms. And you can see it when things become difficult, either God is not keeping up his end, or somehow I'm doing something wrong, and I need to pull the levers harder on my life.

Or I grow disappointed with God. Human-centered Christianity is not much different from any human-centered worldview. It just moves the cross away from the center.

It moves repentance out of the center. There's no sovereign God. There's no grace. It's about doing sophisticated deals with God. So, you know, the reason I give money is because he will reward me. 6-6-6 is a call to wisdom to use our minds to discern. We've got to think more deeply on these things. I mean, you know, Canada is not a Christian culture.

There's all sorts of values that we share as Christians which are the fruit of Christianity. You've heard this picture, I'm sure, a long time ago. But it's the fruit of Christianity, but the tree has been chopped down.

[22 : 45] If you hold on to the fruit without the tree, the fruit's going to become rotten in your hand. If we take any Christian virtue and then take Christ away from that virtue, that virtue will become a false god that we bow down and worship.

We're seeing something of that happen around the whole Christian value of tolerance and diversity. It comes out of a deeply biblical worldview where God creates every human to be his image.

But if you separate God and his truth out away from those things, tolerance and diversity become absolutes in themselves. And that's what explains the totalitarian tolerance.

I heard a word this week, totalitolerance, that's so prevalent on universities across Canada. So there's a world of difference between seeing human dignity as God-given and just believing in my own innate human goodness.

One comes from the worship of God, the other leads to the worship of the dragon. The dragon still hides in political perversion as well as religious perversion and this is where we need real wisdom.

[23 : 56] All of us live under governing authorities within institutions and structures and networks of relationships. How do we best bear witness to the reality of Jesus Christ and his kingdom?

And I finish with this. I just direct you back to verse 8. Verse 8. Verse 8. In verse 8. All who dwell on earth worship the beast, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

It's just a small reminder that looked at from heaven, things are different. There is a war on the saints and we are being conquered by powers.

The reason that people worship the beast is because they don't have their names written in the Lamb's book of life. And the first readers were a struggling minority, growing spiritually lethargic, tempted by sexual immorality, compromising with idolatry.

But this verse says they belong to the Lamb of God and not just to the Lamb, but to the Lamb who was slain. He is the one who conquered death by dying.

[25 : 17] And I think what this passage takeaway for us is that we need to see, we need to look at our lives through the death of Jesus Christ. You see, when he died from a human point of view, it seemed as though he had been overcome by evil power, the lies of the Sanhedrin, you know, the arbitrary weakness of Pontius Pilate and Roman governors.

And he did die. He died painfully. And we know that's exactly where God works salvation from us. Not just in his resurrection, but as he was dying, in his death, he triumphed over the powers and authorities, disarming them and putting them to shame.

It's in the same event, you see, that God works conquering conquering and it looks like Jesus is conquered. In other words, he conquers by being conquered.

And the same is true for us. This is our Lord. We follow in his footsteps. This is why we're called to endurance and faith. Not just, you know, putting up with things, waiting for it all to go away, but

actively bearing pain and staying under it and looking at our lives through the faith in Jesus Christ. Not squeezing them shut to reality, but opening them to this great big spiritual reality that we get our life by giving it away, that we conquer by being conquered.

[26 : 43] And though we are weak, he is very strong. And though 6'6 looks very impressive, it's just a human number. It will never be perfection.

That comes to us from God alone, through Jesus Christ. Amen.