

Conquering by being Conquered / Evening Service

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 January 2017

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this evening? In Christ's name, Amen. So we're back in Revelation.

Fantastic, just easing our way into it with the mark of the beast. Just two reminders about this book, if you're kind of joining us for the first time at St. John's.

So we've been in a series in Revelation. Just a couple of reminders. Let me say a couple of things about Revelation at the start. One, it's odd, right? It's odd to our ears. Flannery O'Connor was this American author.

My wife loves Flannery O'Connor. She's from the south, the southern states. And she wrote a couple of novels, a lot of short stories. And she was once asked why her writing is so strange.

Her style is technically called, I think, southern Gothic. And so somebody asked, why is your writing so strange? And here's her response, slightly abridged here. She says this, I think this is a great description of what Revelation does.

[1 : 35] Shouts at us. It paints these baffling and bizarre pictures that we can't ignore, that stay with us for a really long time. Because it's trying to jolt us out of complacency.

Second thing I'll say about Revelation, just by way of introduction here, before we jump into chapter 13, is you remember that Revelation is not like a crystal ball.

It's not some weird code we have to decipher. Revelation is mostly about discipleship. It's mostly about, it's trying to help disciples be disciples.

And it does that in two main ways. One, it wants us to see our sort of present reality in the light of the future. So it talks about, it talks about the return of Christ and God making all things new.

But the other way it helps us be disciples, is it helps us to see the present in the light of the unseen realities of the world.

[2 : 38] Remember the Greek word for Revelation is apocalypse, which literally means an unveiling, like a look behind the curtain. You're peering behind the curtain and you're seeing what's going on in the background.

And this is what this chapter is up to. We're looking behind the curtain. And when we look behind the curtain, what do we see? We see the devil. We see the devil at work, pulling strings. Revelation 13 doesn't want us to be naive about that.

Right. There's a show on Netflix called Black Mirror, which my wife and I have a love-hate relationship with.

I don't know if you've seen it. I don't know if I can recommend it. It's a sci-fi, it's sort of a sci-fi anthology. And different characters, different story each week. And the focus is on the dark side of technology.

It's very visceral. It makes you want to sort of go offline forever when you watch Black Mirror. In fact, my wife has put tape over all of the cameras on our computers at home.

[3 : 49] But there's a number of episodes where the main protagonist is this unseen person or group or organisation who is using technology to sort of manipulate people. And you actually never meet the manipulators.

You never find out who this group is. You never find out who these people are. All you get is the story of these people with really devastated lives. And I think this is what, this is kind of like Revelation 13.

Satan, who's described as a dragon in Revelation 12, doesn't actually want to show himself. He won't appear in Revelation 13. But his plan is to destroy.

He just does that through these intermediaries. Like in Black Mirror, these folks do it through sort of technology and remain sort of hidden. And Satan has two intermediaries, two helpers in chapter 13.

The first one is the beast that rises from the sea. And the second one is the beast that rises from the land. So here's what we're going to do. So we're going to talk about the first beast, then we're going to talk about the second beast, and then we're going to sort of talk about what the implications are for us.

[4 : 50] But as a bit of a heads up, as you heard the reading, there's so much going on and there's so much detail in here. And you could spend hours on 666. You could spend hours talking about the signs and wonders.

You could spend hours talking about the mortal wound, all that stuff. We won't. We're going to be looking at this at 10,000 feet to get sort of, we're looking to look at the broad strokes of Revelation 13.

All right. Is everyone okay? Are we all right so far? Good. All right. The beast that rises from the sea. Fantastic. So to us, it's quite odd.

But the original heroes wouldn't have found it that odd because they would have been familiar with the Old Testament. In particular, one of the really famous passages in the Old Testament, Daniel 7. And in Daniel 7, Daniel has these visions of these, a series of monsters.

And beasts, actually, they're called. And there's this giant leopard and a bear and a lion. And they represent, in Daniel, kingdoms that oppose God.

[5 : 54] So here, when we're hearing about this particular beast here, they would have immediately gone to Daniel 7. And what John does here is he takes all these individual beasts and he mashes them all together into this absolute horror.

And John is saying, you think the beast in Daniel is bad? Check out this bad boy. This beast has not only mashed together all these other beasts, but this beast has been given crowns and thrones.

And four times it talks about the kind of authority this beast has. Authority over all the nations, it says, at one point. This is a very powerful beast. So what does this beast represent?

What's John trying to tell us? Well, the beast represents evil working through the state. The beast represents political power. Now for John, it was the Roman Empire.

But it doesn't just represent the Roman Empire. It represents all empires through history, all human kingdoms that put God on the sideline. Now I want to say three things about this beast that represents political power, that represents the state.

[7 : 05] First, what does this beast want? What's it interested in? Well, it wants to be worshipped. We see that in verses four and eight. The people worship the beast.

But why do they worship the beast? Well, it's not because it's a beautiful thing. It's not because the state is this beautiful thing. They worship the beast because, verse four sums it up well, who is like the beast?

Who can fight against it? They worship it because it's powerful. And the way our hearts, our hearts are such slippery things. Human hearts have a tendency to fall in behind power.

And that can sort of turn into worship, which is actually what happened in Rome. The Roman, Augustus brought Pax Romana, brought peace in Rome.

And the people of Rome were incredibly grateful for that. And as a result, they sort of, I guess, they just turned a blind eye to the fact that this peace was brought at great cost.

[8 : 11] It was brought through the sword. It was brought through nails. It was brought through crosses. It still happens today, I think. It's that our hearts are very attracted to power.

Obama recently joked about this. No, it was a little while ago. Actually, I think it was like a state dinner or something. And he said, he said, contrary to rumors that you may have heard, I was not born in a manger.

We're attracted to power. The second thing I'll say about the state, about this beast, this beast that wants power, that wants to be worshipped, is, well, if it does represent the state, if it does represent the government, if it does represent political power, what about Romans 13, you may be thinking?

Was anyone thinking Romans 13? No? Let me read Romans 13 to you, and then you might go, oh, actually, yes, we should talk about that. Romans 13. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.

[9 : 28] Those who resist will incur judgment. That's Romans 13. So do we have two texts in opposition to each other here? Romans 13 and Revelation 13.

Romans 13 says, do everything the state says because God's put them in power. Revelation 13, the state is a seven-headed monster controlled by Satan. Like, what do we do?

Is it a contradiction? I think there are two opposite mistakes we make when interpreting these passages. I think the first mistake is this. Well, let's talk about Romans 13 a little bit.

Do everything the government says. You can sort of look at it and say, well, that's kind of what it's saying, right? In 1985, there was a guy called Michael Cassidy. He was the founder of African Enterprise, which was an organization that's in Christian leadership training.

And he launched something called the National Initiative for Reconciliation in South Africa. And he was trying to address the apartheid thing, and he was trying to call leaders on both sides to repentance and reconciliation.

[10 : 30] So it was great. So it was a big name in Africa at the time, in South Africa in particular. Anyway, he managed to get an appointment with President P.W. Botta, who was the president of South Africa.

And, you know, a stork, chaparite kind of guy. Anyway, so October the 8th, the story goes, 1985, he walks into the president's office hoping for some dialogue. And Botta stands up, opens the Bible, reads Romans 13 to him, and then dismisses him.

Now, what was Botta's problem? Apart from being a racist, right? Apart from that, what was his problem? He believed Romans 13 was saying, whatever the government does, God approves.

Now, what's a more thoughtful and faithful approach to this when we take in the whole counsel of God? Now, I'd point us to Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights leader. He wrote a letter to his fellow Baptist clergymen back in the days, in the height of the civil rights movement, when they were starting to do, when they were starting up these mass protests.

And, of course, some of the protests required people to break the law in protesting. And so he knew that some of his fellow clergymen didn't like that because of things like Romans 13.

[11 : 47] So he wrote a letter to him. Let me read a snippet to you. I think he explains well a more thoughtful approach to the passage. Here we go. He goes, You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws.

This is certainly a legitimate concern since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools.

It is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, how can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others? The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws.

There are just laws and there are unjust laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

I would agree with St. Augustine that an unjust law is no law at all. How does one undermine, determine, sorry, when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral code or the law of God.

[12 : 47] An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law or natural law.

So one problem is thinking this. It's thinking that everything the government does is good because Romans 13 says so. But I think we need to take, that's not the right approach, obviously.

The opposite problem is reading Revelation 13 and saying, well, all government is idolatrous and all government is a debacle and diabolical, so let's all just pack up and we'll go become, you know, like survivalists and we'll live in the woods and wear camo and stuff, right?

So let's talk about how to think about this well. Is all of the state, all political power controlled by Satan? Or is it all like, we have to do everything the government says?

Well, how do we reconcile this? So let's talk about Romans 13 for just a minute and then we'll get back to Revelation 13. Okay, Romans 13, clearly wrongly used to support unjust political systems.

[14 : 00] So I think the best way of interpreting it is by saying Romans 13 is talking about general principles and not extreme examples, okay?

So here's my sort of elevator pitch for approaching Romans 13. Modern life is impossible without the rule of law. Rule of law enforced by government. So we need a rule of law because of the fall.

People do bad things, Christians do bad things, church people do bad things. When Philadelphia was founded, they disbanded the police because they thought, oh, we're all Christians. We don't need the police force.

And of course, stupid idea, they needed a police force within a year. Now, God's big plan is to bring about the world under Christ, right?

To bring the world back to himself under Christ. But in the meantime, so that things don't completely fall apart and degenerate, God has set up a state. Or you could say this, civilization, the state government, providentially, in God's plan, came about to combat the effects of the law, to keep aggression in check, to protect the weak from the strong.

[15 : 06] This is not saying that Trudeau is the best prime minister in the world and God has sort of said, yeah, he's the greatest man alive, let's make him a prime minister. It does not mean that God approves of everything Trump does.

Simply speaking, Romans 13 is saying that it's in God's plan that some form of government is necessary in a world at this time. That's what Romans 13 is saying.

Now we have Revelation 13 and that's saying, it's not saying all government is completely evil. It's saying this, it's saying, it's a reminder that whilst this is true, let's not be naive.

Let's not be naive about the power of the devil working through these God-ordained institutions. The state is God-given but it can become blasphemous, it can be perverted.

On the campaign trail, Obama, I'm picking on Obama because it's too easy to pick on Trump, right, basically. Obama describes in the campaign trail America as the last best hope on earth.

[16 : 19] Now I'm a fan, I love America, I married one of them, you know. I really, really like Obama, I think he's fantastic. But encouraging your people to believe that your country is the last best hope of the world is going too far.

I think that is idolatrous and it's asking people to trust in the wrong thing. So, a reminder, where are we at in this sermon because we've sort of gone all over the show here.

Right, we're talking about the beast from the sea. That is the first half of the passage. We're saying three things about it. The first thing is this, the beast wants to be worshipped and people worship it because it's powerful.

The second thing, Revelation 13 does not contradict Romans 13. They are both true. The third thing I want to say about the beast from the sea is this, we need to expect opposition from the beast.

It should be no surprise to us that the state or the ideology of the age or political forces are in opposition to the Christian faith.

[17 : 31] Verse 10 here says, if anyone, I mean it's so matter of fact, I love it. 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.

Christians are a subversive voice in a state that believes it's been given ultimate authority to shape culture. So we should be not surprised that the Christian voice is sometimes suppressed or ridiculed.

And John wants us to not be surprised by this. And I think it's very helpful that we're given a forewarning for this because I think it takes away some of the power of the oppression when you sort of know it's coming. Okay, it's three things about the beast from the sea.

There is so much more to say about that we're going to move on. The beast from the land a lot more quicker now. So if the beast from the sea is political power, the land beast is what?

It's religious power. So we're looking at verses 11 to 18 here and we see from the text that it's described as a lamb but with the voice of a dragon. So this is literally, it's like, it's not literally, but it's a dragon in sheep's clothing.

[18 : 47] And what's the big goal of the dragon in sheep's clothing? Again, there's so much to say about this. I'm just going to pick one thing. What's the big goal of the dragon in sheep's clothing?

Verse 12, the second beast makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast. Okay, we've said it's religious power.

It's religion that's been co-opted by the darkness. It's religion that gets people the trust in government or the spirit of the age. And the best early example we have is John's time in the Roman era.

So you had Pax Romana, you had Augustus, you had, you know, you had this colossal thing called the Roman Empire that was so powerful. And one of the ways they stayed in power and one of the ways they got people to do whatever Rome asked was they started a religion.

Very clever. Started a religion. It was called the Imperial Cult. So they had priests and temples and stuff and people could worship the emperor. So John saw this happening very clearly in his day.

[19 : 57] We saw it last century in Germany. Many, many of the churches in Germany in World War II were co-opted by Nazism, supported the regime.

Things could have been a lot different if they hadn't been the case perhaps. We see it today. But today, it's just a bit more sort of dressed up. It's a bit more subtle. We see it when churches preach a gospel of consumerism and materialism.

It's a gospel whose main interest is self-interest. And here's how it happens. So the state or popular culture, the ideology of the day, the great power of the day, it creates this meta-narrative.

It creates this super value. A value above every other value. So that value could be the rights of the individual. So that right of the individual trumps anything else. It could be materialism.

It could be anything. It could be anything. And what can happen is churches can fall into line. And they can support that super value by adjusting the gospel to kind of say the same thing.

[21 : 08] So the end of the gospel is the same end of the ideology of the day. So it's like, come to Jesus and he'll get everything you want. He'll get you everything you want.

He'll solve all your problems. He'll make your life better and smoother. And all lovely and cool. And he'll get you a boyfriend or a girl. Whatever you want. He'll sort it out for you.

When that happens to a church, when it happens to a minister, that is the work of the second beast. Oh, goodness. There's so much to say.

But I'm just going to summarize here. One of the ways I could have preached this or broken up the passage is you could say the whole thing is a series of parodies.

A whole lot of parodies in this passage. A parody is like an exaggerated imitation of something else. So the dragon and the two beasts, it's like this unholy trinity. It sort of functions like a trinity, kind of like the second beast is like the Holy Spirit that points glory to God, etc.

[22 : 10] So it's kind of like a parody of the trinity. Or the mark of the beast is a parody of the seal of God in Revelation 7 if you remember that God seals people on their forehead. Now the mark, John here, or the number of the beast is 666.

What is that all? Well, if God's number is 7, 6, it's not quite 7, is it? It looks, it kind of is close, right? It kind of feels like it's kind of close but it's not.

And so 666, it's like, no, look, it's not God. No, it's not God. No, it's not God. And the Bible often says things in triplets if it's trying to make it really clear. No, look, it's just not God.

And then you sort of think it's kind of close, it's actually not God. So it's kind of a parody of the wonder and beauty of God represented by this number 7. The signs and the wonders that we didn't actually even touch on in the second half of the passage, lots of signs and wonders, that's a parody of the signs of Christ.

This beast who survives, this mortal wound, most likely talking about Nero, but long story, that that's a parody of Christ's resurrection. So I think you could say this, the beast presents us with a parody of, and let's just talk about the first half of the passage, a parody of what good government should look like.

[23 : 25] And it's a parody that's very sort of convincing. And it presents this illusion of power, and power is a slippery thing, and our hearts are slippery, and as I said, we tend to fall in line behind power, and it does something to us, and power is this kind of thing that we want to belong to power.

So we compromise our faith. We compromise the gospel. And our Christian faith becomes a bit soft and a bit selfish. But see, we belong to a different power, don't we?

One that sacrificed and died. So, what do we got here? Revelation 13, we have two beasts that John doesn't want us to be naive about.

There's not just two beasts here, there's two calls at the end of each half of the chapter. There's a call. Let me remind you of those calls and we'll finish on these. Verse 10, after describing the first beast, verse 10 says, here is a call for endurance and faith of the saints.

We must be faithful folks, especially when what we believe goes against the cultural tide. The second call at the end of verse 18 there, it says, this is a call for wisdom, calculate the number of the beast.

[24 : 36] In your context, it's saying calculate. Think about how your faith has been potentially co-opted by cultural norms, by the ideology of the day.

How's your faith kind of just melted a bit around the edges and so it's kind of what you're really jonesing for in life, it's just kind of what everyone else is jonesing for.

And not the kind of life that the gospel calls us to. Remember, the way you discern this parity from the real thing is to focus on the real thing and to spend time with Christ.

Your goal in life should be to see the Lamb of God as the most beautiful thing, to see Christ as the most magnificent thing, the most, more satisfying than anything else in your life.

And as you see him, as you see him, I think the works of the beast, the works of the dragon will become pretty obvious and will look petty compared to what Christ offers you.

[25 : 50] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.