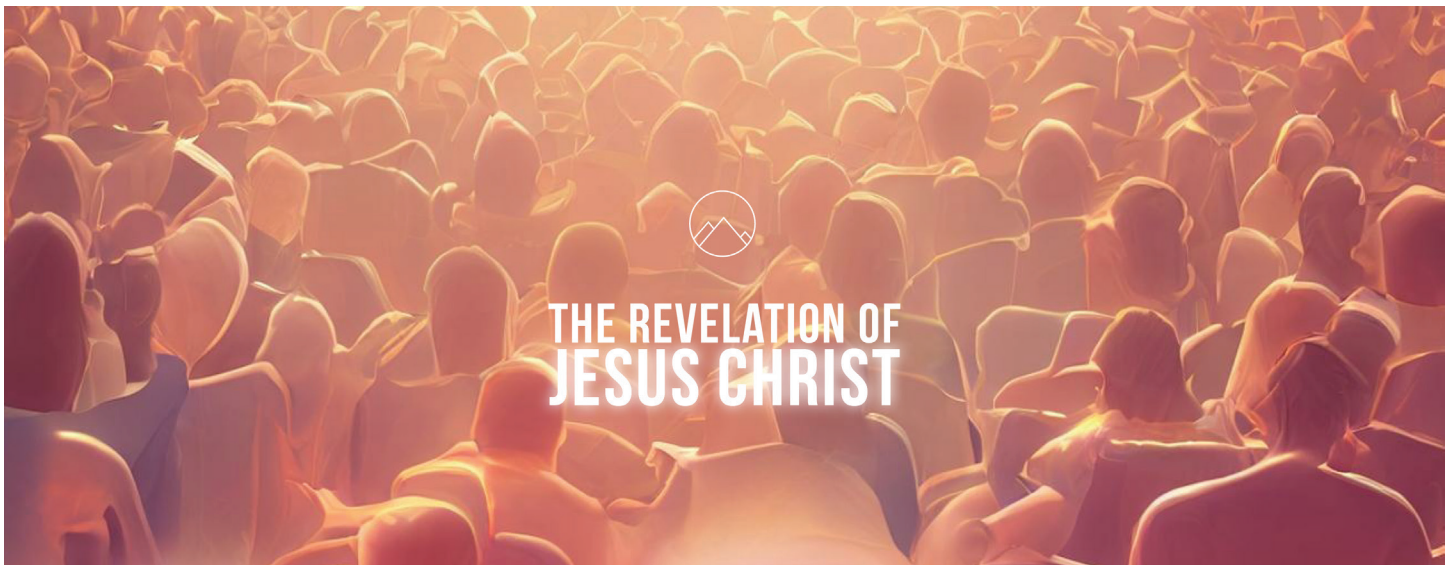




Sunday, March 3, 2024
Revelation 13

Revelation 13 is perhaps the most recounted chapter in the entirety of John's vision - primarily because it talks about the Mark of the Beast - the number 666 - towards the end of the chapter. And although that tends to be the major focus for many while reading this chapter, it's crucial to understand that this information pops up at the very end of the chapter - a chapter that is often dismissed until the end but never-the-less, a chapter that significantly helps to frame our understanding of this most interesting and complex number. And even more interesting to me, is that this chapter is a chapter that is all about worship.

The term worship is mentioned here a total of 5 times and each one of those times is in reference to humanity's response to either the Dragon, the Beast of the Sea or the Beast of the Earth.

You see, whether we realize it or not, all of humanity worships something because that is all part of the creation story. You and I are created to worship. And if our worship doesn't go to God, then it will go somewhere else. No one on planet earth can say that they don't worship anything. We see it every year in sports stadiums all over the world as thousands upon thousands of people come together in the worship of sport. We see it in concert halls.....Hollywood personalities.....and so on and so forth. Humans worship because that is what we were created to do. And so the issue then becomes who or what will we worship? And this is such a strong underlying theme in Chapter 13 as Jesus helps us to understand just why we are under the pressure to worship anything other than the One, true Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Revelation 13:1-18 (NKJV)

‘Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name. 2 Now the beast which I saw was like a leopard, his feet were like the feet of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. The dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority. 3 And I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. And all the world marveled and followed the beast. 4 So they worshiped the dragon who gave authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast? Who is able to make war with him?”

5 And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies, and he was given authority to continue for forty-two months. 6 Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. 7 It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. 8 All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

9 If anyone has an ear, let him hear. 10 He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword. Here is the patience and the faith of the saints.

The Beast from the Earth

11 Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. 12 And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed. 13 He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. 14 And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. 15 He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. 16 He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, 17 and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

18 Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.

We first met the dragon last week in Chapter 12 where we also met a child, and a woman. The woman gives birth to a 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 - thus representing Jesus death, resurrection and ascension. The child is none other than the Messiah - Jesus Christ.

And the dragon is furious. But, since he is thwarted in his attempt to kill the Child, he goes after the woman who represents the followers of Jesus - the church - (past, present and future). If the dragon cannot destroy Jesus, it will then seek to destroy those whom Jesus loves. But the dragon does not come at the followers of Jesus directly. In Revelation 13, we see that the dragon now does his work in the world through two agents. Two agents portrayed as beasts – one from the sea, and the other from the earth.

The dragon and the two beasts make up a kind of trinity of sorts which is clearly a mockery of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This is one of the greatest tactics of the enemy - mimicry of God. Keep in mind that Satan/the devil is the father of lies and so his strongest tool is deceit, trickery, lies.... He mimics God because he wants to be God, but knows that he can't so he tries to trick and deceive as many people as possible into thinking that he is God instead. We will see this level of counterfeit take place throughout the rest of the chapter, but it's important to understand that one of the main themes in this chapter is the forces of Darkness mimicking the forces of Light. John now introduces two beasts that will be integral to this onslaught of deceit. The Beast of the Sea and the Beast of the Earth.

Now, to the first century reader, they would have immediately been drawn to two infamous beasts of old - the leviathan of the sea and the behemoth of the earth. They both appear in the book of Job, but not a whole lot is said about these two other than the fact that they were both massive awe-inspiring beasts often interpreted as symbols of chaos, primordial forces, or cosmic adversaries.

But deeper than that, the description of these beasts is quite telling. John uses an incredibly specific description here and tells us that the beast from the sea was like a leopard, it had feet like a bear and the mouth of a lion.

Leopard, bear, lion - very specific features, right? Well, if we go all the way back to the book of Daniel, we see that in Chapter 7, Daniel recalls having a dream where he sees four great beasts coming up from the sea. One beast was like a leopard, and one was like a bear and one was like a lion. As the dream unfolds, it becomes clear that these beasts actually represent the governmental and political powers within human kingdoms that have rejected the living God as their source of

power as they have sought to become their own gods.

And so in John's description of the Beast of the Sea where we see the elements of leopard, bear, and lion, we can clearly see that this is pulling from Daniel's vision and therefore would also represent political and governmental systems that have rejected almighty God as their source of power. That without God at the centre of the system, every single political and governmental power will ultimately fall prey to the beast of the sea because, as Darrell Johnson suggests, 'power that is no longer exercised under God will always seek to play God.' It's not that all political powers are subjected to this though. It is just that in the quest for power, political powers become vulnerable to the dragon's offer of more power. And that lure of greater and greater power that the dragon offers, is often hard to refuse.

John would have seen this distinction particularly in his day with Rome as Rome did not necessarily set out to be like God or to be its own god, but it slowly moved in that direction. You can track their digression all the way back to 27 BC where Caesar Augustus began giving god-like attributes towards Julius Caesar. A few decades after that when Tiberius took the helm, he allowed temples to be built in his honour where the pressure was then placed on citizens to go and offer their worship of Caesar. This kind of behaviour carried on over the next few decades and in AD 54-68 when Nero took office he embraced his divine ordinance to do things that could not be questioned like killing off numerous members of his very own family. From that point on, Roman leadership took a whole other turn and when Domitian took lead a few decades later, he demanded that the whole world worship him as 'Lord and God.' He even changed the name of the Roman Empire to the 'Eternal Empire.'

So, John is telling us that when powers that are no longer 'under God' seek to 'play God,' they slowly demand our allegiance and ultimately absolute loyalty.....which is what worship is and which is why John/Jesus describes this beast as blasphemous. Because only One can be worshipped and that is God almighty. And as Christians, we give Him and Him alone our worship.

This is why John says that Christians are affected here. Because in an ideal situation, political and governmental authorities should submit to God Almighty, and as such Christians by following governmental authorities, are honouring God. However, when political powers and governmental authorities start to play God they start to expect and even demand compromise from Christians as their lust for power which is fuelled by the dragon, grows. Daniel saw this in his day with the political powers of Babylon demanding that everyone worship the king. But Daniel would not and as such was thrown into the fire. But it's not just Babylon of old, even in our generation we can clearly iden-

tify the various political regimes that are being lead by the Beast of the Sea.

And the next thing we read, is that one of the heads of this beast has been mortally wounded, but then comes back to life. If this beast represents political, power gone astray, then what would this deadhead coming back to life then signify?

The text teaches us that it is this action that causes people to align themselves with this beast and worship him. This is a tricky section to walk through, as there are two main points of view. The first one suggests that this head represents a literal antichrist, political figure that dies and then comes back to life to continue his reign of terror as the dragon continues to empower him. All throughout history when major political figures like JFK or even Hitler died, many started saying that they would raise back to life. Even all the way back to when Nero died at the young age of 32, many thought that he would come back to life and even his successor Otho started calling himself Nero claiming that he had actually come back to life. But the challenge is that this view doesn't take into consideration the term, 'as if.' John says in verse 3 that, 'I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed.' This terminology suggests that something looks dead but is not dead. And so the other viewpoint is that this head does not represent a person but actually represents an oppressive system that has looked like it has been wiped out - perhaps with a war, or a coup, or even the death of a leader - but the damaged system doesn't actually die but recovers and comes back to keep its control of the people.

The implication being, that, since the beast (the oppressive regime) apparently cannot be overcome - since the beast keeps coming back from defeat - there is a resolve to accept the inevitable and declare allegiance to him. And this is something that we have seen from the beginning of time through every oppressive political power that has decided to reject submission to Almighty God. That, even though the individuals in power may be removed, the character or nature of the oppression still remains.

The Beast of the Earth now, is a little bit easier to understand. Verse 11-15 gives us multiple examples of the signs and wonders that he performs: Miracles and calling fire down from heaven and even breathing life into an idol of the Beast of the Sea. And so, we can see that this is yet again another indication of the mimicry of the power of God that has been used all throughout the Old and New Testament. After all, it was Jesus who performed miracles and healings, and it was Elijah through the power of God that called down fire and it was God who breathed life into humanity. And so just as the Beast of the Sea represents dragon manipulated political power, the Beast of the Earth now represents dragon manipulated religious power - counterfeit religion. And it's interesting to note

the connection that the two beasts have with each other. And that connection is ultimately worship. Both beasts get their power from the Dragon/Devil and work in tandem - whether politically or religiously - all throughout the earth in order to get humanity as far away as possible from worshipping Jesus. And because we all worship something, that means that if we are not worshipping Jesus, then naturally, we will end up worshipping the beast because the Bible teaches us that we cannot serve two masters.

We see this connection clearly with the construction of the idol of the Beast of the Sea. The text shows us that the Beast of the Earth breathes life into it because ultimately political power needs a source of power and cannot exist on its own. And when we remove God as that source, then the beast becomes that source.

The point being that when you remove God as the source of power from politics and religion, all hell will break loose.

We learn that the beast puts a mark on people, a seal, again, mimicking the Lamb, who puts a mark, a seal, on His people. The beast makes it very difficult to buy and sell, to do business, unless persons have this mark - either on their forehead, or on their right hand. What is John getting at here?

Well, the Mark of the Beast of course.

The mark of the beast is such a massive, massive talking point when we talk about the signs of the end times. Even to this day, I can remember being a kid watching a movie where the mark of the beast was given to those who did not make the pre-tribulation rapture and if you did not take the mark then you were immediately sent to the gallows, and your head was chopped off. But there were a few people that had grown up in the church but had denied Christ and were 'left behind' but in the end decided not to take the mark and the end of the movie was them walking towards the gallows.... Man, I was scared, spit-less for weeks, months, years after watching that. And you've got people, today, trying to look at everything and anything in our society to try and figure out if 'this or that' is the mark of the beast. Some tend to think that it is a chip that will be inserted in your body somewhere that will be tied to your bank. That technology already exists today. Others think that it's a vaccine and some have suggested that it will be a literal tattoo that we have somewhere on our bodies. Still others suggest that it will have something to do with a biometric tracking system, or some kind of genetic modification or even some kind of brain manipulation leading to mind control....the list goes on and on and on. And these examples - rightly so - can lead to great fear of the future.

But because this text is not necessarily futuristic, but also encompassing past and present, and because the book of the Revelation seeks to show us, that which always has been, but has yet to be revealed, there is another thought that is gaining momentum in this generation and one that seems to be more congruent with the overall theme of this kind of apocalyptic literature, and figurative symbolism, and not just as it aligns to futuristic events.

The first thing I want you to see is that this act of putting a mark on people is the enemy's way of mimicking what Christ has already done with us as Christians. You may remember that in Chapter 7 John says that God would place a seal on the foreheads of Christians thus symbolizing ownership. That we belong to Him and to no-one else. And that imagery was specific and intentionally taken from a practice in the Old Testament where masters would place their brand or seal on the forehead of their slaves in order to identify them as their personal property.

And so the picture is that God is taking the church - those who have already devoted themselves to His service from every tribe, tongue and nation and placing His seal upon them as a way of saying that these are mine. They are my property. They belong to no-one else. This isn't a literal action though - but meant to be taken symbolically as the seal of God is the presence of the Holy Spirit and the way that you know someone is sealed of God is by their Spirit-empowered nature and character. John again in his Gospel says: 'They will know they are Christians by their love towards one another.' And so the seal of God upon His people as talked about in Revelation 7 is therefore not a specific futuristic event that has yet to come, but something that has been happening all throughout the New Testament Church and will continue to do so.

Well, now in Revelation 13 it's the Dragon's turn. It's almost as if this section is a direct response to Chapter 7 where he now mimics Jesus by also giving his followers a sign. Not a literal sign but just like with the followers of Jesus, this too would be a sign of the presence of their master within them and their character, nature and actions would align accordingly and they would know that they are beastly by their character and their nature which is from the Devil.

In his book *Discipleship on the Edge*, Darrell Johnson says: 'The mark of Jesus Christ is the character of Jesus Christ, sealed on us, and in us, by the Holy Spirit, whom he sends to live on us, and in us. So too the mark of the beast. It is not a tattoo on the forehead, or on the right hand nor a microchip embedded under the skin. It is the character of the beast embedded under the skin. It is the character of the beast implanted in the soul. Just as the presence of the Holy Spirit makes himself known through Jesus disciples, so the presence of the beast makes himself known through its disciples.'

John goes on to make another jarring statement by indicating that without the mark of the beast, one would be limited and restricted in their commerce and dealings. ‘...that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.’

If the interpretation of the mark of the beast is the character or allegiance to the beast rather than a physical mark then this would mean that those who do not align with these beastly ways may face social or economic consequences, such as being ostracized, persecuted, or denied access to resources, privileges, or opportunities within the societal framework governed by the beast’s influence.

Does this sound at all familiar to you? Well, it should. If we go back for a moment to the seven messages that Jesus had for the seven churches, we can actually see this exact situation play out in the church of Thyatira.

Thyatira was a port city that relied on markets and trade for its citizens, as a means of employment. Now, in order to create a fair pricing standard trade guilds were set up. The rule was made that if you wanted to sell your wares, you had to be a part of these trade guilds. Now, the problem with trade guilds was that it wasn’t just an association created to create a fair pricing structure. It was much, much more involved than that. In fact, upon acceptance into a guild, it was then expected that full participation in all of its functions would be embraced and celebrated. These trade guilds had common meals together. The meal would begin and end with a cup of wine, poured out as an offering to the gods. Many of these meals would have followed regular pagan sacrifices where animals would be offered as a sacrifice on the altar. The meat would then be given to the worshipper to make a feast for his guild in honour of the god that they had just sacrificed to. Still further, this trade guild feast often included copious amounts of alcohol and frequently degenerated into sexual immorality as drunkenness took its course and lewdness and sensuality had a field day.

In this one example, we can clearly see both the political and religious beasts working in tandem to entice the people of the day to perhaps unwittingly embrace its mark of allegiance. So clearly, the Christians in the city of Thyatira in the first century would have already experienced the ‘mark of the beast’ in full array, as they had a decision to make about whether or not, they would accept the nature and character of the enemy knowing that in doing so it would allow them to buy and sell, or to stand firm with the nature and the character of Jesus Christ, whose name was already written on them knowing that this would restrict them from buying and selling in the market. There was no literal name or number being written on foreheads here and no chips being implanted under the skin of the right hand, but make no mistake, the trade guilds were every bit a scheming mark of the beast.

So based on this approach then, the two beasts are continually working from generation to generation trying to place their mark on as much of humanity as possible.

So, what then do we make of the number of the beast 666?

This is the age old question and historically, there have been a number of methods that have been taken in order to try and figure out what this number is.

The first approach would be the 'Gematria.' This is a process where numbers are assigned letter values. People have tried to find names of historical figures whose letters-as-numbers add up to 666. Nero for example is said to come out 666 in Aramaic, but only if you add the term Caesar to his name. And so between the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic language, you get hundreds and hundreds of names suggestions that if you add the right prefix or suffix add up to the number 666.

Another approach would be the 'triangular number' approach which looks at the number 666 through the lens of a triangular number as its title suggests. The first triangular number being 1 and the second being $1+2$ and the third being $1+2+3$ and the fourth being $1+2+3+4$. If you do this all the way up to the 36 triangular number, you get 666. And once you've done that you can go back to 36 which is the triangular number of 8 which is only 1 more than 7.....?!?

But John says on numerous occasions that in figuring out the number of the mark of the beast you need wisdom, not to be a mathematician or numerologist as these two approaches necessitate.

There is a third approach however that seems to connect far better to the overall theme in the book of the Revelation.

John says that the number 666 is called the number of a man. The greek word for man here is the word 'anthropos,' which simply means human. So John is saying that this number does not represent a specific person as some have suggested, but more-so meant to be understood that this is a human number. It's almost as if John is saying that this beast is a superhuman force, but I can give it a human number to put it in its place. If we look at the number 6 throughout Bible history, we can see that this number has always been associated with fallen humanity. In the Old Testament, Goliath was six cubits tall and his spear weighed 600 shekels of iron. The statue of King Nebuchadnezzar was 60 cubits high and 6 cubits wide. Two of the most evil and vile forces of power to ever have existed.

The number 6 is also one less than 7 which represents completion. The ancient Rabbis tended to view the number 6 as the number of incompleteness as it was not until the 7th day that creation was deemed complete. Now, we have already seen John on numerous occasions reference the Holy Spirit using the number 7 which signifies His complete perfection. And because the beast is intent on mimicry but isn't God, the best that he can do is 6. The best that religion and politics can do for the world is 6. The beast can mimic all it wants but it will never measure up.

Why 3 sixes? Because 3 is also the number of completion as we see in the Holy Trinity. Three sixes would then imply that the beast is 'completely incomplete.' Entirely insufficient. 100% not God Almighty. He is a counterfeit god with a counterfeit trinity and insufficient power and limited authority. He wants to be God but will never be able to because he's always falling short.....hence the number 666.

So, perhaps then, the number assigned to the beast is not meant to identify the beast, but to characterize the beast instead. And the character of the beast is all around. Seeking whom he may devour. Continually twisting religion and politics - deviously trying to deceive - even the elect - so that they too will embrace the nature and character of the beast.

We've seen this in Thyatira, John saw it with Rome, and Daniel encountered the mark of the beast when he and his boys would not worship the king and especially when religion and politics came together in an attempt to kill Jesus the Messiah. But they came up short as the number 6 always does. For the grave couldn't hold Him. Death couldn't contain Him - and He rose victoriously and will reign forevermore.

And because He is the one, true God, then He gets our worship. All of it. Not anything less because He alone deserves it.

So, where do we go from here?

So it seems to me that the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth have been trying to trick, deceive, and lure humanity into allegiance to the dragon by accepting their mark for generations upon generations. And this counterfeit trinity will continue to try and manipulate politics and even religion and even mix the two into a consortium of contempt towards those who follow the way of Jesus. And every generation of Christians from the birth of Christ until the return of Christ has had to face this pressure and will continue to do so in the future. The Dragon and his beasts will continue to target the people of God - attempting to restrict the people of God and continue to try and get

them to shift their allegiance from the Lamb to the Dragon. But since we have already been marked by God, then it is our responsibility to live for Him and to not be deceived or tricked by the enemy.

At the end of the day though, I can't help but think though that part of the tactic of the enemy is to keep us pigeonholed into thinking that this is only a futuristic event. Because if our eyes are focused only on the future, then we aren't being mindful to guard ourselves in the present.

Perhaps then the apostles Paul's challenge to the church in Ephesus is a fitting and applicable response for us today. And so I leave us all with this reminder to stand firm: (ask congregation to stand)

Ephesians 6:10-18 (NKJV)

'Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

14 Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; 18 praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints...'

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