

Revelation 13:11-18

Last week we discussed the identity of the beast in Revelation 13. There have been many guesses as to who this person or entity is. I argued the beast John is describing is symbolic for the Roman Empire. Now this does not mean the beast is a past phenomenon and we don't have to worry about it today or in the future. Jesus told his disciples in the first century there will be many anti-christs and false prophets who will seek their own glory and attempt to lead others astray. All one has to do is to think through the times since the first century to see that the church has been persecuted and continues to be so in our day. We see the beast in recent past with Hitler's Third Reich and in Stalin's Socialist Republic. We see it in the present with the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan and in the People's Republic of China, and in the corrupt Islamic nations of the Arabian Peninsula. The reality is that Satan, the red dragon of Revelation, will use anybody and everybody to persecute the church and create an atmosphere of idolatry and false worship. The good news is just like Stalin's and Hitler's movements ended in defeat—so will the other anti-christs in the future. Remember, Satan's time is short and he knows it! Let's keep that in mind as we wrestle with the identity and activity of the second beast of Revelation

11 Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon.

At the conclusion of chapter twelve, recall the dragon is furious and wants to make war against the saints. He is described using imagery that seems to fit well with a Godzilla movie. In rage he stands on the seashore overlooking the landscape, seemingly waiting to execute his next battle plan (12:17b).

In chapter 13, we are introduced to his two accomplices, the first beast and the second beast, which is later referred to as the false prophet (Revelation 16:13; 19:20). Last week we discussed the first beast as rising out of the sea with seven heads and ten horns. In contrast, the false prophet—who we will study today—is described as having risen out of the earth and with two horns sticking out like a lamb. In total, we have the imagery of demonic influences coming from the seashore, the sea, and the earth—which encapsulates the earth in its entirety. Together these three hope to have complete dominion over the entirety of the world. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet! Together they form their own counterfeit trinity.

The second beast in some ways represents a false Christ. It is described as a lamb, like Jesus, the only exception being that it has two horns as opposed to seven. We are told that it seeks to promote spiritual worship and has been given the ability to perform great signs. But aside from those descriptions, the false prophet is very different. He seems to be the spokesperson for the beast. Notice that he speaks like a dragon, which likely is a reference to it speaking in deception. Recall that Jesus, when discussing the nature of the dragon, or Satan, stated that lying was the devil's native tongue. It was his natural language and a part of his character (John 8:44). Likewise the beast speaks the dragon's language.

12 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.

The job description of the false prophet is simple; it wants to promote the worship of the beast. Everything it does is with that objective in mind. Last week I mentioned the beast with the mortal wound likely refers to the Roman Empire, which Nero almost destroyed, but was subsequently built up many years later through Vespasian of the Flavian family. In the future it might mean something else has come back to life, perhaps the Soviet Union as a world power. However, when it comes to John's first century readers, such a reference to the beast being affiliated with the Roman Empire, would have made sense because it was figuratively resurrected from the dead.

The false prophet appears to be in subordination to the beast in a couple ways. Recall the beast had ten horns whereas the lamb here has two. Secondly, the authority it has been granted, whether through deception, worship, or through miraculous signs, is always described as being administered in the presence of the beast. It is as if the false prophet won't do anything on its own behalf and is somehow accountable.

13 It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, 14 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.

Among the great signs it can do—the most noticeable is its ability to make fire come from the sky. This demonstration which is reminiscent of Elijah the prophet, at Mount Carmel, will be done in the presence of others. It will be a public event! There

is some debate as to whether the miracles are real or false. Perhaps like magic, they are an illusion (i.e. deception). We can't be sure, but Jesus did warn that there will be a time when false Christ's will arise and be able to cast out demons and perform other great signs—yet still be unknown to him (Matthew 7:21-23)! Regardless the beast will use these signs as a tool to get people to worship the beast.

The idea of the beast telling people to make an image to the beast brings to mind the episode where Moses' brother, Aaron had the people give him their jewelry and he fashioned an image of a golden calf when he thought Moses had disappeared. After this the people respond, "These are your god's O Israel!" (Exodus 32:4b).

Ever since then, many people, including God's people, have chosen to replace Him with someone or something else. Many times other things are more attractive than God and we place our devotion there!! Intimate and peer Relationships! The preoccupation with money! Political and professional athletes! Food! Television! You name it! You don't have to carve out an image to practice idolatry. All you have to do is locate what captures your affection the most!

15 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.

The idea of giving breath to the image of the beast seems misplaced initially. But it does bring to mind the image of God giving breath to man during creation. This bringing life to an image is a counterfeit creation. Only God has the power to create life. The next sentence is equally puzzling. Not only can this image breathe—but apparently it will be able to speak. This whole section could be symbolic—or it might be an illusion like ventriloquism. Ventriloquism was a common practice in biblical times where people would claim they were the channel for dead spirits to speak through them. Remember the false prophet aims to deceive others into thinking the beast is worthy of worship.

Apparently the beast causes this image to speak—again most likely through the technique of ventriloquism. The message is haunting, worship me or die! The very same message first century Christians heard as they stood trial before a tribunal.

16 Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the of the beast or the number of its name. 18 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.

Finally, there is the mention of the famous mark, the number 666. As mentioned previously, many have attempted to unravel this mystery. Many languages use a numbering system where each letter is assigned a numerical value. But instead of speculating we must consider what information the Scriptures provide as to clues.

First, John tells his readers to calculate the code. In other words, he expected his readers to know the secret. Therefore any notion that 666 refers to Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler, Ronald Regan, the Taliban, etc., would not qualify as the answer because such explanations were not relevant to them from a contextual standpoint.

Secondly, we are told this code *is* a number of a man. Therefore, John is thinking of a particular person.

Thirdly, In Revelation 17:9-10; we are told the seven heads on the beast represent seven mountains—which most likely is a reference to Rome, known as the city of seven hills.

Fourthly, In the same passage we are told the seven heads of the beast also represent seven kings. He goes on to explain that five of those kings have passed and one *is* and one has not been. According to Josephus, the sixth Roman king was none other than the Nero—the one who began the persecution on the Christians—the one who ended the lives of the apostles, Peter and Paul.

Fifthly, if one calculates the Hebrew transliteration of *Kaiser Neron*—then add the numbers—it will add up to 666.

Disclaimer: Now I want to note that the number 666 can add up to a lot of names. There really is no way to know for sure because within that number lies hundreds of possibilities. With that being said, the identification of this number as Nero cannot be proven for certain—but the other clues mentioned seem to make him the best possibility, especially since the first century church would have easily identified with that possibility. Yet in the end it is still a guess

The text also mentions the mark of the beast. Though many dispensationalists have advocated bar codes, computer chips inserted in the skin or VISA cards—the mark seems to fit best with the Imperial Seal of Rome. Perhaps one was branded like a slave or had documents with the royal seal upon it. The Greek rendering of the term would advocate this position. Still there is another explanation for this 666 imagery. Some scholars have speculated that 666 is simply the number of a man—which makes it imperfect in contrast of God the Father, whose number is seven, representing perfection and completeness. I'll let you choose.

The Identity of the False Prophet

So the big question revolves around the identity of the false prophet? Who is it? Not surprisingly the opinions have varied.

1. The Jewish priesthood which used Roman authority to conveniently persecute Christians, Christ himself.
2. Nero or one of the Caesars who promoted their own worship and allegiance to the state
3. The papacy of the Catholic Church and its establishment in Rome.
4. The reformers who challenged the authority of the papacy.
5. Mohammed who has led millions to follow Islam
6. Ronald Regan, whose name can also be calculated with the numbers 666.

The best thing we can do is to see if the Scriptures provide any clues.

One thing we are told is that the false prophet seems to focus on the religious functions. 1. Like a priest, he promotes worship—but in his case toward the beast. 2. He does miraculous signs like the prophet Elijah, causing fire to come from the skies—which makes others think of Elijah and how he used fire to reveal the true God! 3. He encourages idolatry by promoting the worship of man-made images. 4. He even serves as judge, executing those who do not worship the beast.

The second detail we get from Scripture is that there will be *many* false prophets—and antichrists for that matter. Jesus teaches us that many false prophets will come in his name and will do great signs and wonders! Our Lord also mentions that many of these false prophets will lead people astray, even some of the elect (Matthew 24:24).

This brings to mind an important lesson. Just because you see someone performing signs and wonders does not mean they represent Jesus. Recall in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus—the rich man wanted to go back to his relatives to warn them about God's judgment. He was certain a miraculous sighting would change their hearts and accept Christ. Yet Jesus ends the parable by saying if they did not believe Moses—they will not believe the miracles (Luke 16:31). It is an important lesson for us to comprehend! Signs and wonders do not validate a person's message! In the end we must focus on the message not the miracle! The message validates the messenger. God's Word will last forever!

So who is the false prophet? My answer comes with the understanding there will be many in the future. In the case of the first century readers it seems best to see this as description of emperor worship in the first century. We have already discussed that the beast John describes would fit best with the Roman Empire. The best way to understand the false prophet is to understand his role in that context, namely the promotion of emperor worship. Recall that many first century Christians were killed because they would not sacrifice to Caesar or acknowledge him as Lord. They were killed because they would not go to the temples or acknowledge the many statues that attested to the emperor being divine.

As I mentioned, that does not mean the period of the beast and the false prophet is over. As long as Christians are being persecuted by movements like the Chinese National Republic and certain Arab nations—the work of the beast and the false prophet continues to this day. Perhaps in the end times instead of being another beast and false prophet there will be *the* beast and *the* false prophet. When that time comes we will definitely know without question. But for now, it is best to focus on the first century readers John addressed. There are several things we can learn from them because of their bravery. I want to provide five examples. I am grateful to one of my former pastors, Rob Rayburn for these insights. I will paraphrase them in my own way. Here is what we can learn from them in the midst of present day persecution. In our society deception is presented in such a way.

1. **We are taught one should not proclaim Jesus in our pluralistic Culture.** Many believe that the first century folk were sheltered in the sense that they weren't exposed to many other religions. The general consensus seems to be that today we live in a different culture, much more diverse and pluralistic where people of different faiths bump shoulders everyday. But the reality is that first century Christians lived in a similar kind of culture where their faith was the minority and they had to learn how to blend in with their culture. They knew there were other religions and they knew what their beliefs were—yet it did not prevent them from proclaiming their faith. They were instructed to be gentle and respectful and to share the hope that they have. Furthermore, in the midst of persecution they did not give into physical threats or the prospects of dying. They held on to their belief in Christ to the end and would not give into idolatry.
2. **There is this perception that if one holds to the exclusivity of Christianity that all other religions are completely wrong.** That is a lie. There are many things that are good pertaining to other religions, mainly the idea of loving your neighbor and helping the poor. I admire the reality that during the worship service Islam has all nationalities present—in that sense there is no Sunday morning segregation, whether intentional or not. I like the aspect of Buddhism which emphasizes freeing yourself from earthly desires. In Judaism the idea of family time on the Sabbath without electricity and the conveniences of modern technology which allows you to focus on God and your family. We can learn from them! There is a lot of good to be had in other religions. As Christians the main thing we are firm about revolves around the nature of salvation. Jesus is the way to the father. First century Christians recognized the good in others, while at the same time not compromising their devotion to God and to His Son.
3. **There is this notion that Political Correctness is a higher priority than reason:** While we should strive to live at peace with our culture it does not mean that we should abandon reason when sharing what we believe. We live in a culture that likes to advocate that all roads lead to heaven for the sake of political correctness. However, this reasoning flies in the face of the law of non-contradiction.

For example, Buddhism does not believe in a personal god. They believe all are part of the One. The goal is to take the eight-fold path to achieve this oneness. How can one conclude that Christianity, which believes in a personal God, and Buddhism, which doesn't, conclude both are right. How can we conclude both Islam and Christianity are right when Jesus is not seen as the Son of God—but merely one of the other human prophets. How can one conclude all roads lead to heaven when Islam vehemently denies the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. How can Judaism and Christianity be both right when the Jewish belief system is that Jesus was not the Messiah—only an imposter worthy of death. It goes on and on. Atheists don't believe in a personal god—they believe in chance and matter as their creator. Hinduism believes in karma and reincarnation. The idea you have to get it right in this life or else pay the consequences in the next one. Equating all these ideas and philosophies as being equally true flies right in the face of reason and non-contradiction. If the first century Christians accepted this *all roads lead to heaven* philosophy then it is likely they would have avoided much of the persecution they experienced. All they had to do was hold to their faith and acknowledge Caesar as Lord and worthy of worship. That would have been the politically correct thing to do. However, they choose to emphasize reason over political correctness.

4. **Christianity should be presented as a set of beliefs and ideas; but not as a historical fact**
There is also the tendency from the pressure of our culture to present the Christian faith as a set of ideas. This is what we believe. Here are the general ideas and principles that lie behind what I believe; it involves a man named Jesus and the reality of sin. This is not how the first century church witnessed. They did not teach Jesus as a set of ideas—they stated that Jesus was a historical fact. Jesus did come. He was the Messiah and he died for our sin. And because he came—we must do as he stated we should do.
5. **God's so called "messengers" must have a message in line with the biblical testimony**
Finally, when we are confronted with "messengers" we perceive as "saviors" we must evaluate their message according to the Scriptures. Does their message line up? Or, is their philosophy new or directly contradictory to the Bible. As we have discussed—do not allow great sins and wonders—whether they are real or not—to be the reason to abandon your faith and worship the beast. The Bible states God's Word endures forever. We must not

forget his message is true and eternal. Jesus once said the Scripture cannot be broken. The first century Christians would not deviate from biblical convictions and they paid the price for it in their own lifetime. But right now in heaven they are rejoicing in their white robes and waiting for their blood to be avenged.

Admittedly, it is hard to accept that everyone who does not believe in Jesus is deceived and will not merit eternal life with God the Father in heaven. Many of us know good folk who are kind, generous, loving, and very smart. Some of us have family members we love very much who are not Christians. We don't want to imagine the possibility they will not go to heaven. But the reality is that deception is the very objective of the beast and false prophet. Furthermore, the reality is that the world is deceived and aren't even aware of it. The only way to begin the process of unraveling the deception is to share the truth of Christ. We must share the gospel of Christ and explain the reality of sin and its affect—along with the very real fact that God loves us deeper than we can ever imagine. Scripture teaches God's desire is that everyone would be saved, whether white or black, rich or poor, Christian or non-Christian. The only way this can happen is if we do our part among our peers to unveil this curtain of deception.

In the end, we are Christians because men and women of the first century opened their mouths for Jesus and gave up their lives to proclaim their unwavering belief that Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord. May we take up the challenge in our time to do the same! Future generations are depending on us to pass on the baton.