

“Another Beast” (Revelation 13:11–18)

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Last night I happened to be at the Red Sox game with my parents and one of my brothers. (My mother had acquired free tickets to the game through her workplace the day before.) I hadn't planned on going to the game before Friday afternoon, and I was running a little behind in my work. So, I brought a little work with me. I have a little journal version of the book of Revelation that has the text of the book and some blank pages upon which to write notes. My brother noticed the journal and asked how I interpret this book of the Bible. He asked, “Anti-imperialism or end times?” In other words, do I read the book of Revelation as primarily against the Roman Empire and totalitarian states, so that it's really a political book, or do I think it's primarily about the so-called end times, the final period of history before Jesus returns to earth to bring this age to an end? I wanted to say “neither” and “both” at the same time. I wanted to say simply, “I understand it the way God wants us to,” or something like that, though that would sound rather arrogant, perhaps. So, I said something like, “It's not just anti-imperial or about the end times. I think it's about the whole period between Jesus' first and second comings, so it's relevant for all ages. I think it's more anti-Satan than anti-empire. It's really about worship.”

That is what the book is about. It's a warning to Christians. It tells us that we are in the midst of a war. It's not primarily a political battle, a battle between nations or citizens and totalitarian governments. And, as I've shown in previous weeks, it's not just about conflicts in the years or days before Jesus returns to earth. The real war that we're in is a battle of worship. And it's not about how we worship, what musical styles we use, where we meet, how we dress, and all those superficial issues. It's about whom or what we're worshipping. What is the object of your worship? That's what Revelation is really about.

In this morning's passage, we're going to see that this war is difficult because great deception is involved. The real enemy is not our political enemies, or the people who have different religious beliefs than we do. The real enemy is Satan, the devil, and he often uses very subtle deceptions to attack us. Last week, we saw that there can be

beastly totalitarian governments that attack Christians. In some cases, as in the Roman Empire or in the Soviet Union or North Korea or elsewhere in the world at different times and places, the government directly attacks Christians. They kill Christians, imprison leaders, shut down any church that dares to preach the Bible faithfully, and so on. That kind of attack on Christians is obvious. It's about as subtle as whacking someone with a club. But the more powerful attack is subtle. Satan deceives through people who look impressive, who look nice and kind, who may even speak with a nice, respectful tone of voice, yet who utter deceptive words that lead to hell and not heaven. Christians, this is the kind of attack that we must be on guard against.

Before we look at this morning's passage, which is Revelation 13:11–18, I want to quickly remind us of where we are in this book of Revelation. In chapter 12, we read about a dragon who attacks the people of God, symbolized as a woman, and a special child, who I said was the Messiah or Christ, the anointed King of kings, none other than the Son of God who became a human being, Jesus. The dragon couldn't destroy the child, so he raged against the woman. But Satan was thrown out of heaven, he was dealt a mortal blow, because Jesus died for the sin of his people, rose from the grave (in triumph over sin and death), and ascended into heaven. Still, Satan rages against God's people, knowing his time is short and his ultimate demise is secure. At the end of chapter 12, he stood by the sea.

In chapter 13, Satan summons two beasts. The first comes from the sea, and this beast seems to represent totalitarian governments, governments that are extremely powerful, led by people who are viewed as gods. In John's day, this was the Roman Empire. But the beast takes many forms throughout history. The beast seems to be something of a cheap imitation of Jesus, a parody of the Son of God, because he was supposedly dealt a mortal wound, but was healed, sort of the way that Jesus died on the cross and then rose from the grave. Today, we see another beast, this one from the land. In Jewish literature, the beast of the sea was Leviathan, and the beast from the land was Behemoth.¹ The sea represented a force that is chaotic and evil, outside of man's control. But the land was supposed to be safe and stable. The sea was more obviously symbolic of evil, just as the beast that comes from the sea provides a full-frontal attack on God's

¹ See Job 40–41, or the non-biblical book of 1 Enoch 60:7–10.

people. But the land was supposed to be safe, and the beast from the land appears to be safe, but he is just as devilish as the first beast.

We'll see all of this in this morning's passage, Revelation 13:11–18. I'll read the whole passage now, and then explain what is happening in it:

¹¹ Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 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. 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. 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. ¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 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 666.²

This second beast, the one from the earth, also parodies Jesus, at least to an extent. It looks like a lamb, which is how Jesus is pictured in the book of Revelation. Jesus is the Lamb because he was sacrificed for the sins of his people. One of the most obvious messages of the Bible, told from cover to cover, is that humans are sinful. We rebel against God. Though we were made for God, to love him and live for him, we don't do that. We love ourselves and everything else, and we think more highly of ourselves than we think of God, not to mention others. We want to be like God, being in control of the universe. The nature of sin is essentially to attempt to remove God from his throne, from his central place of authority, from his rightful place as the only object worthy of our worship. God can't leave that kind of chaos, that kind of lawlessness and evil, unchecked, because it is destructive. So, God has a plan to remove all evil from the world. But he also has a plan to rescue evil people, to take away their sin and guilt and transform them into the people that they should be.

When Jesus died on the cross nearly two thousand years ago, he was not simply a victim, someone oppressed by the religious and political powers of his day. Ultimately,

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

his death was God's plan. Jesus died for sin, though not his own, because he never sinned. He alone is truly righteous. But he died to take the penalty of sin that his people deserve. Anyone who is united to Jesus by faith, who trusts him, loves him, listens to his voice, and is willing to follow where he leads, has their guilt taken away and has received Jesus' righteous status. The rest of that person's life is a process of transformation, becoming more like the person we should have been all along. But that transformation won't be final until we see Jesus face to face. There's more to the story than that, but that is the core message of what we call the gospel, which literally means good news.

So, Jesus is the Lamb. But notice that this beast, this impostor, appears to look like a lamb, yet it is not. It looks innocent, but it speaks like a dragon, like a deceiver and slanderer and accuser. This beast looks nice, and the tone of its voice might be pleasing, but the content of its message is Satanic.

What does this beast do? It tries to get people to worship the first beast. It "makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast." There are two things to notice about this beast. One is that it seems to imitate the Holy Spirit. Christianity teaches that there is one God who exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. This teaching is somewhat mysterious and hard to fully comprehend, but there is one being of God who is also three. If the dragon seems to be a cheap copy of the Father, if the first beast seems to be an imitation of the Son, then this second beast seems to imitate the Spirit. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would glorify him, that it would lead his disciples into all truth. This is what Jesus said in John 16:13–15:

¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The Holy Spirit transforms people, empowering them to see the truth about Jesus and to believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit points people to Jesus. He glorifies Jesus. He takes the things of God, the things of the Father and Son, and communicates them to people. He is the Spirit of truth. But this second beast glorifies the first beast. It points people to an idolatrous dictator. It even gives breath to an image of the beast, the way that Holy Spirit gives life and breath to God's image bearers. In fact, Jesus is the true image of God (2

Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), the one who best and most clearly represents God, and we should turn our attention to him. But the second beast animates an image of the first beast and leads people to worship it. This second beast is not the Spirit of truth; rather, it's a spirit of deception, of idolatry, of false and evil worship.

So, the second beast seems to imitate the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we have an evil trinity, an inverted or perverted trinity of sorts: the dragon, the beast, and the second beast, who is later called the false prophet (Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). This second beast is not only a parody of the Holy Spirit, but it also seems to imitate the prophets of God. It performs “great signs,” the way that Moses performed signs to authenticate his messages that came from God (Exod. 4:17, 30; 10:2). More specifically, it seems to imitate the ministry of Elijah, a prophet of God who called fire down from heaven (1 Kgs. 18:38–19; 2 Kgs. 1:10–14). If you remember Revelation 11, you'll recall that the church is pictured as two witnesses, two people like Moses and Elijah, who perform signs and wonders (Rev. 11:14–6). Well, this beast, this false prophet, performs counterfeit signs and wonders of its own, bringing fire from heaven, performing other signs or alleged miracles, and even making this beast speak.

Before we make more sense of this passage, I want to be clear about what this second beast represents. On the most basic level, this second beast, this false prophet, represents all false prophets. It points people to worship an idol through “signs” that look like miracles. Now, perhaps these events are counterfeit miracles, mere tricks or hoaxes. The third-century theologian Hippolytus writes about so-called sorcerers who took part of an ox, covered it with wax to look like a skull, and made it speak through some kind of tube placed in the skull. Someone could speak through the tube, and it would appear to the audience as though this skull was speaking.³ Similar wonders could be produced today. There was a man named Peter Popoff, a supposed evangelist and healer, who would draw audiences to himself. He would somehow know the names of people in the audience and the ailments that plagued them. He would call them by name, have them come to the stage, and then supposedly heal them. Apparently, the people filled out

³ Hippolytus of Rome, “The Refutation of All Heresies” XLI, in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. J. H. MacMahon, vol. 5, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 39–40.

prayer cards when they came in, and someone would read this information to Popoff through a wireless earpiece that he wore. They would choose people with conditions that could be psychosomatic, conditions that could be “healed” through the power of positive thinking. These people would be amazed that Popoff knew them by name and knew what bothered them. They wanted to believe that this alleged man of God could heal them. But the whole thing was exposed as a scam.

Perhaps the false prophet performs real signs, events that appear to be miraculous. We must remember that in the story of the exodus, while Moses performed signs and wonders of God, Pharaoh had his own magicians who could perform some seemingly supernatural events (Exod. 7:11, 22). The Bible does teach that there are evil spirits at work in the world, and there’s no reason to think that they could not perform some feats that science could never explain.

But these signs, whether hoaxes or real events produced by demonic powers, are not directly from God. They do not support God’s message to the world. Instead, they point people away from God, away from the truth, and to an idol. More specifically, they point people to Satan. Sometimes, this Satanic idolatry is obvious. After all, there literally are people who claim to worship Satan. On Friday, I was driving behind a car on 93 that had three Satanic bumper stickers on it. There are times when idolatry is tied to a totalitarian regime, as in Daniel 3, when Nebuchadnezzar made an image of God and commanded the people of Babylon to worship it, upon pain of death (Dan. 3:1–7). That seems to be the story behind the second part of verse 15. There also the obvious hucksters, like Peter Popoff and Benny Hinn, who make a profit off the gullibility of people. In those cases, idolatry is often tied up with a desire for power—either to acquire power or to see power on display. And that is a warning to us all. If you are seeking power, or to see signs and wonders, you may very well be led away from God.

We crave power for ourselves, and we love to see power on display. But the way of Christ is not always a demonstration of power, at least not in the way the world thinks of power. Christians are not promised miracles. God does not promise that we will all see signs and wonders in this life. He doesn’t promise us riches or healing from diseases or freedom from pain—again, not in this life. He does promise us ultimate healing, but we

wait for that healing in the life to come, in the world to come. In this life, we experience joys and peace, but also pain and suffering.

It's important to know that, because most false teachers promise us an easy way. Most false teachers are not obviously false, like those shameless huckster prosperity gospel teachers and faith healers. These false teachers can look very good. They can be charismatic people who are attractive in appearance and personality. They can seem nice and kind and wise. They may quote Scripture. But appearances are deceptive. In Matthew 7, Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:15–16a). False teachers can look like sheep but bite like wolves. They can appear like innocent lambs but speak with a forked tongue.

The apostle Paul knew this well. He taught that there is one true message about Jesus. He told some Christians in Galatia that he was astonished that they were turning to a different gospel, a false gospel. And he swore that even if an angel were to come and preach a different gospel, they shouldn't believe him (Gal. 1:6–8). He said, "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). Think about that: even if someone who appears like an angel comes with a different message, one contrary to what we read in the Bible, we should reject that message. It seems like Paul is saying it's possible that someone who looks very good and godly could come with a false message.

In another one of Paul's letters, 2 Corinthians, Paul warns Christians about false apostles. It's worth reading a portion of that letter. This is what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:1–4:

¹ I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

Paul taught these Christians about Jesus. He wanted them to grow in their faith and to become purer in the way that they lived. (We'll talk about that virgin business next

week.) But he says that he was worried that the Corinthians might be deceived, just as Eve was deceived by the serpent in Genesis 3. Again, Satan deceives, and he doesn't do this in obvious ways. He doesn't come dressed in red, with horns, tail, and a pitchfork. He may look like a grandmother or a wise professor or your best friend. Paul even says that false teachers can appear like apostles or even angels. Here is what he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:12–15:

¹² And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

The false teachers that were deceiving the Corinthians were actually false apostles. They disguised themselves as real apostles. That's what false teachers do. Why? Because even Satan disguises himself as angel of light. Again, appearances are deceptive.

And even the content of false teachers' words is not obviously evil. Satan's message isn't obviously evil or demonic. Usually, it's twisting a little bit of truth just enough so that it becomes a lie. But in the end, false teachers teach "another Jesus," as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:4. That happens today. People love to say that God is love, which is indeed in the Bible (1 John 4:8, 16). But what they do is substitute their view of love for the biblical definition of love. Instead of thinking about love as a verb, as something like seeking to give what is good and right to others, they think of it as a sentiment, an emotion, or perhaps just romantic desires. Then, they define God in terms of what they think love is. The result is that God becomes a sentimental figure, someone who desires nothing greater than for us to be happy doing what we love to do. But the problem is we love what is wrong (see 2 Tim. 3:1–4). And God doesn't want us to love things that destroy us. God's love is a tough love, a love that will separate us from what we desire if it's bad for us. God is more concerned with our holiness and healthiness than our happiness, and he isn't afraid to make us unhappy for a while in order to make us holy and healthy.

The great battle that we are engaged in is a battle of worship. The issue is whether we are going to worship the true God or a false god, a god of our own creation. If we

insist that God must be like us and must give us what we want, we're not worshipping the true God.

The battle is also one of truth and lies. Will we listen to God's voice or Satan's? Satan's voice may sound soothing, comforting, and even plausible. It might sound correct to us. We need to identify God's word and to reject false messages. And the only way we can do this is to know the Bible and know all of it. False teachers quote the Bible, but they quote only parts of it and take it out of context. If we know all of God's word, we won't be taken captive by this second beast.

Now, I have left something important unexplained, and I want to address that. And that thing is the infamous mark of the beast. As a reminder, here again is Revelation 13:16–18:

¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.

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.

The second beast causes all kinds of people, regardless of wealth and social status, to be marked so that they cannot buy or sell without this mark of the beast. Even this mark is a copy of what God does. In Revelation 7:3, we were told that God's people are sealed on their forehead. This is not a literal, visible mark. There is not birthmark or tattoo that indicates that someone belongs to God. We are also told in Revelation that God's people have his name written on their forehead (Rev. 3:12; 14:1; 22:4). Again, this mark isn't one that we can see. So, I don't the mark of the beast is visible, nor do I think it is a bar code or microchip.

Being marked simply means belonging to someone else. In the ancient world, slaves were marked, indicating they belonged to a certain master. The mark on the hand or forehead also refers to something in the Old Testament. God told Israel that they were to remember how he rescued them from slavery. Regarding the Passover meal, God said to Israel in Exodus 13:9, "And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt." In Deuteronomy 6, God told the Israelites to teach their children God's words. Then, he said, "You shall bind them as a sign on

your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (Deut. 6:8). This is not intended to be literal. The idea is that God’s word should be in front of and before God’s people. But those who belong to the beast are marked as belonging to that beast. They think of the beast and live for him.

In John’s day, almost two thousand years ago, the beast was the Roman Empire. The beast could even be associated with the emperor himself. At that time in the Roman Empire, there was something called the imperial cult. The emperor himself was regarded as a god, and people in the empire were pressured to worship the emperor. At the least, they were expected to offer sacrifices to him. For most people in that day and age, this would not be a big deal. For pagans, adding another god to the pantheon was simply what you do. But Christians recognize there is only one true God, and they claim that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord and God. Christians would refuse to worship Caesar, and they could pay for it. They might lose jobs or business.⁴ Perhaps that’s what John means, even if John uses a bit of hyperbole here. But wherever people are pressured to worship an idol, this second beast is at work, and it is often costly for those who refuse.

And perhaps the beast is identified here as the emperor. Many commentators have shed much ink trying to figure out what the number 666 means. If it refers to one person, the best option is probably Nero, a wicked Roman emperor. If you transliterate Nero’s name from Greek into Hebrew, and then assign number values to each of the Hebrew letters, the total is 666. But that depends on transliterating a Latin name from Greek into Hebrew, and doing so in a particular way. Many other solutions have been offered, though they often depend on some questionable moves to make names fit the number 666. Interestingly, the only other place in the Bible where we read of the number 666 is in 1 Kings 10. Solomon, David’s son, the third king of Israel, amassed an enormous amount of wealth. He had 666 talents of gold (1 Kgs. 10:14). A talent was a weight, and that’s a lot of gold. We’re also told that Solomon had a throne, and that before the throne were six steps, and on either side of each step was a lion. So, if you were to look at the throne, you would see six lions, six steps, and six lions, or 666 (1 Kgs. 10:18–20). If 666 reminds us of Solomon, it reminds us that a beast can look very impressive, with lots of

⁴ John might also have in mind the coins used in Rome at that time, which bore the emperor’s image.

wealth and wisdom, yet ultimately be an idolatrous leader who leads people away from God.

But remember how numbers in Revelation work. The number seven is repeated throughout the book. Seven is the number of completion and it's the number of perfection. Three is also a perfect number, and it's the number of the persons of the Trinity. Here, however, we have a false trinity, a Satanic trinity. This trinity may look impressive, but its persons fall short. They aren't perfect sevens, but rather very imperfect sixes. They try to imitate Father, Son, and Spirit, but it's a cheap imitation, and Christians need to know that. Those who are wise will not fall for imitation righteousness and false prophecy.

My message for all of us is to reject what appears to be good if it is contrary to God's word. Be wary of what looks impressive. Even messages that sound right can be very wrong. We can know whether a message is godly or Satanic by knowing the Bible, which is God's word, written by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth. If we know the truth, we will be set free (John 8:32). Ultimately, the Truth is Jesus (John 14:6), the real Jesus of history and the Bible. Know him, know the truth, and know true freedom, the freedom to worship God as we should.