

## **“The Beast” (Revelation 13:1–10)**

**June 20, 2021**

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What is the relationship between Christianity and government? That’s an important question, and one that will receive several different answers, depending on whom you ask. In the past, there have been state religions; the nation’s government was aligned completely with one religion. But that doesn’t go well, for it usually ends up distorting the religion and oppressing those who don’t adhere to that religion. On the other end of the spectrum, some say that religion and government should never be intertwined, as if the two could be kept entirely separate. That sounds nice, but the fact is that given the nature of religion, nothing can be kept separate from it. That’s true of Christianity, at least. You can’t take the Christian faith and put it in a nice little compartment. Christianity is a way of one’s total life, not just Sunday mornings. It’s a way of understanding the whole world, not just a few religious activities. And government often gets connected to most things. That is particularly true when the size of a government grows.

The Christian view of government says two very important things. One, government is instituted by God. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, says, “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” (Rom. 13:1).<sup>1</sup> He goes on to say that the government has been instituted by God to punish wrongdoing. Peter, in his first letter, says, “Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God” (1 Pet. 2:13–15a). The government has been instituted by God to punish evil, to encourage or praise good, and, I think, to keep some sense of order. That is a good thing.

But governments have a way of growing, and people in government, particularly the leaders at the highest level of government, have a way of looking at themselves more highly than they ought. People in government start to think they can fix every problem. People ruled by governments can start to think of those governments as saviors or gods. When a government gets so large that it is viewed as the greatest authority on earth, when those governing see themselves as more important than God, then they become beasts. That’s the second thing that Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

says about government. Those beasts will die, but not before doing great harm, often to God's people.

Yet the message of the Bible is that God is with his people through such devastation, and that all such beasts will be destroyed, to be replaced one day by an enduring, truly righteous, peaceful kingdom ruled by the King of kings. We see part of that message this morning in Revelation 13:1–10.

Here's just a quick reminder of what we've seen so far in the book of Revelation. Revelation is the final book of the Bible, one that is very different from most books of the Bible. It's mostly a series of images given to a man named John at the end of the first century. We need to remember that John was a Jewish man who was thoroughly immersed in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. He also lived in the Roman Empire, the world's superpower at that time, which controlled lands from Europe to Northern Africa to the Middle East. Those contexts are very important, and we need to keep them in mind if we are to understand this book.

John was told to write down what he saw (and what he heard) and to send that message to churches. Much of what John sees are graphic images of enduring spiritual realities, realities that existed in his day and in ours. There are several passages in Revelation that deal with the end of this age, when Jesus, the Son of God, returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. So, Revelation is indeed about the so-called "end times." But it's also about the "in-between times," the time between Jesus' first coming, to deal with the sin of his people, and his second coming, to remove all evil and bring in a new creation, a world that is purged of all sin and suffering.

Last week, we read Revelation 12, which tells of a dragon who is also the devil, or Satan. We saw that he tried to attack Jesus and he attacks the church. The dragon went to attack the people of the church, particularly through lying and accusing. And at the end of chapter 12, we were told that "he stood on the sand of the sea." Now, in chapter 13, he summons another creature from the sea.

Let's now read Revelation 13:1–4:

<sup>1</sup> And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. <sup>2</sup> And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. <sup>3</sup> One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. <sup>4</sup> And they

worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”

To understand this passage, we need to know what it is based on. The image of the beast rising from the sea comes from Daniel 7. It’s worth reading part of that passage. Here is Daniel 7:1–8:

<sup>1</sup> In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel saw a dream and visions of his head as he lay in his bed. Then he wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter. <sup>2</sup> Daniel declared, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven were stirring up the great sea. <sup>3</sup> And four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one another. <sup>4</sup> The first was like a lion and had eagles’ wings. Then as I looked its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the mind of a man was given to it. <sup>5</sup> And behold, another beast, a second one, like a bear. It was raised up on one side. It had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth; and it was told, ‘Arise, devour much flesh.’ <sup>6</sup> After this I looked, and behold, another, like a leopard, with four wings of a bird on its back. And the beast had four heads, and dominion was given to it. <sup>7</sup> After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns. <sup>8</sup> I considered the horns, and behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots. And behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things.

Like most passages in Revelation, this passage in Daniel is about a vision. It’s not meant to be taken literally. Later in Daniel 7, these beasts are interpreted as being kings (Dan. 7:17). Kings represent kingdoms, and interpreters often understand these beasts as representing the Babylonian, Persian-Medean, Greek, and Roman empires. These empires were known for being powerful, for dominating their enemies, and for oppressing God’s people. One empire followed another, and the beast in John’s day was the Roman Empire.

Here in Revelation, aspects of those four beasts are combined in to one. The beast also resembles the dragon, who has seven heads, ten horns, and diadems (Rev. 12:3). The idea seems to be that this beast is a powerful government that is ultimately backed by Satan, who gives the beast power and authority. The heads on the beast may represent various kings who claim to be gods or to have god-like power. In the Roman Empire, the emperors came to be known as sons

of god. Domitian, the emperor at the time this book was written, wanted to be called “lord and god.”<sup>2</sup> So, they were committing blasphemy.

The emperors could also be rather beastly. One of the more infamous emperors was Nero. He had his mother killed, he was responsible for killing two of his wives, and he persecuted many Christians after a devastating fire in Rome in the year 64. According to the Roman historian, Tacitus, some Christians “were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night.”<sup>3</sup> Domitian, the emperor at the end of the first century, had several Roman senators killed, one for making a joke and another for observing the birthday of a former emperor.<sup>4</sup> According to the Roman historian Suetonius, “After his victory in the civil war he became even more cruel, and to discover any conspirators who were in hiding, tortured many of the opposite party by a new form of inquisition, inserting fire in their privates; and he cut off the hands of some of them.”<sup>5</sup> He also took to himself the title “Lord and God.”<sup>6</sup> He had one of his cousins killed,<sup>7</sup> and he seduced his own niece after she married another man. Later, he “became the cause of her death by compelling her to get rid of a child of his by abortion.”<sup>8</sup> He also persecuted Christians, though the details of this persecution aren’t clear. The Christian historian Eusebius wrote, “DOMITIAN, having shown great cruelty toward many, and having unjustly put to death no small number of well-born and notable men at Rome, and having without cause exiled and confiscated the property of a great many other illustrious men, finally became a successor of Nero in his hatred and enmity toward God. He was in fact the second that stirred up a persecution against us.”<sup>9</sup>

That was how beastly the Roman Empire could be, and John’s initial audience probably understood that the beast represented Rome. They may even have thought that it represented

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<sup>2</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of Caesars: Domitian* 13.

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.4, [https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Annals/15B\\*.html](https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Tacitus/Annals/15B*.html).

<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *Suetonius: The Lives of Caesars, The Lives of Illustrious Men* VIII.X.2–4, trans. J. C. Rolfe, vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 361.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.X.5., 363.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.XIII.2., 367.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.XV, 372–73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII.XXII, 383.

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria, “The Church History of Eusebius” 3.17, in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 147.

Nero. That is because of what we read in verse 3. The beast had one of its heads wounded, and it appeared that the wound was mortal, but then it healed. Nero committed suicide in the year 68, and at that time, it seemed like the Roman Empire was going to collapse. Nero left no successor, and there were four emperors and a civil war within the next year. However, Vespasian became the next powerful emperor, returning stability to Rome. There was even something of a myth that Nero never died, but that he was in hiding in Parthia, a region in the east. Three people who claimed to be Nero emerged within the next two decades.

Whatever the historical details John may have had in mind, the image of the beast nearly dying and then being healed is a parody of Jesus' death and resurrection. Remember what I've said before: the devil doesn't have the power of God, he can't create anything truly new, but he is deceptive and likes to make cheap knock-off versions of what God has done. Greg Beale, whose commentary I have been reading, lists several parallels between Jesus and the beast: "Both Christ and the beast (1) have swords, (2) have followers who have their names written on their foreheads (13:16–14:1), (3) have horns (5:6; 13:1, 11), (4) are slain (5:6; 13:3, 8: σφάζω), (5) rise to new life and are given new authority, (6) have authority over 'every tribe, tongue, people, and nation' (5:9; 7:9; 13:7; 17:12, 15), and (6) receive universal worship (cf. 5:8–14; 13:4, 8)."<sup>10</sup> Satan wants us to marvel at his power and resilience. We might even say that Jesus' death on the cross dealt Satan a mortal wound—and it did, but he is still alive and still very powerful. Satan would rather us worship anything in creation, even a beastly government, than worship Jesus. Even the words that people utter when worshipping the beast, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?", is an imitation of words of praise that are given to God throughout the Bible (Exod. 15:11; Deut. 3:24; Isa. 40:18, 25; 44:7; 46:5; Pss. 35:10; 71:19; 86:8; 89:8; 113:5; Mic. 7:18).

Now, let us see what this beast does. We'll read verses 5–10:

<sup>5</sup> And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. <sup>6</sup> It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. <sup>7</sup> Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, <sup>8</sup> and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose

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<sup>10</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 691.

name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.<sup>9</sup> If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

<sup>10</sup> 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.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

The beast speaks proud and blasphemous words. It rages against God, attempting to turn people away from God and to the dragon. Perhaps it is the dragon who gives the beast its mouth and authority for this period of time, which is described as forty-two months, or three-and-a-half years. As I've said over the past two weeks, this seems to describe the whole period of time between Jesus' first and second comings (see Rev. 11:2–3; 12:6, 14). As long as there are Christians, there will be some form of the beast fighting against them. That is why it is described as attacking God's dwelling place, or those who dwell in heaven. In the book of Revelation, those who "dwell on earth" are the idolatrous people who reject Jesus. By contrast, "those who dwell in heaven" are Christians, whose true citizenship is in heaven even while they live on earth (Phil. 3:20).

The beast is allowed to make war on the saints and conquer them. This can't be a reference to ultimate conquering, because neither the beast nor the dragon can ultimately separate Christians from Christ. It must be a reference to persecution, including even death. Yet even the beast's authority is ultimately not from dragon. In verse 7, we have that divine passive again, a subtle reference to God that uses the passive voice. The beast "was allowed to make war" and "was given" authority. Who allowed the beast to make war and who gave it authority? Ultimately, it is God. That might seem strange to think that God would permit authority to this Satanic beast. But nothing can happen apart from God's plan and activity.

So, why would God allow the beast to do what it does? It is hard to say. But part of the reason why God allows beastly activity to occur is because he gives people over to their sin. The consequence of rejecting God ultimately leads people to become beasts, something less than human. When we reject God, we are rejecting the source of truth and reason, the power that humanizes us. That's not to say that all atheists or people of other religions are beasts. But if we fail to recognize God, we can never know the ultimate truth, and our desires will always be

distorted in one way or another. And in the end, those who reject Jesus will, in a sense, devolve into tormented creatures. That is the ultimate consequence of rejecting the one true God.

Another reason why God would allow the beast to make war on his people is to sift them from those who claim to be his people but are not. When life is easy, many people claim to be Christians. But when being a Christian is difficult, when it could lead to persecution and even death, many will turn away from Jesus. Some will completely reject him. Others will claim to be followers of Jesus yet reject many of his teachings, fashioning a Jesus in their own image, after their own likeness. Ultimately, everyone whose name is not written in the book of life will reject Jesus.

That idea of the book of life is important. God has written names of his people in this book.<sup>11</sup> These names were written in this book before God created the universe. Those whose names are written in the book will never face condemnation. There are people from every tribe and people and language and nation who will worship the beast, but there are also people from across the globe who will be part of the redeemed (Rev. 5:9; 7:9).

What is the difference between those whose names are written in the book and those whose names are not? The difference is not that those who belong to Jesus have never done bad or have done less bad than those who worship the beast. The Bible is clear that all have sinned against God (Rom. 3:23). The reason why we exist—the reason why anything exists—is to glorify God, to praise and honor him. We were made to know, love, and live for God. That means we should not only love God with our whole being, but we should also obey God. Part of obeying God means loving each other the way we ought to be loved. None of us do any of this perfectly. Sin, our wrongdoing, is corrosive, and God will remove all sin from the world in order to restore it. But before he does that, God sent the one remedy for sin into the world. The only one who can remove our sin and our guilt is Jesus. He is the Lamb who was slain. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who became a human being over two thousand years ago. He alone lived a perfect life, fulfilling God's designs for humanity. But though he was innocent, he died a terrible death, bearing the penalty for sin that we deserve, so that if we trust in Jesus, our sin has already been punished. If we trust in Jesus, our record of wrongdoing is erased, we are forgiven by God, and we are adopted into his family. We are promised that, though we die, we will be raised from the dead in a body that can never die again, and we will live in a perfect world with God forever.

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<sup>11</sup> See also Dan. 12:1; Phil. 4:2; Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27.

But before we get to that new creation, Christians will suffer. Some Christians have suffered tremendously. And I think that's what we see in verse 10. If anyone is bound to be taken captive, imprisoned for the cause of Christ, that is what will happen. If someone has been determined to be slain with the sword for believing in Jesus, that is what will happen. God not only predestines who will be saved, but his plan includes suffering for his people, and intense suffering for some. The words about captivity and sword appear to come from Jeremiah 15:2, where they are used of people who reject God. But here, they seem to be used of Christians, because this passage ends with a call to endurance. Christians will need endurance in order to live through such suffering.

Why would God have us suffer? There are many reasons. Suffering causes us to rely more upon God's power (2 Cor. 1:9). Suffering teaches us that this life is fleeting, and it leads us to put all our hope in God (1 Pet. 4:1–2). Suffering therefore has a refining aspect. Our suffering may not be for our own benefit, however. It may be that when others see us suffering for Jesus, they may realize that our faith is real, and that the object of our faith is worth living and dying for. Our suffering could lead others to become Christians.

None of the talk of predestination should lead us to be fatalists. We don't know what God has planned for us. If you're not a Christian, don't worry if your name is written in the book of life or not. Simply turn to Jesus now, because he is the only way to be spared condemnation. If you sense that you have sinned against God and have not turned to Jesus in faith, forsake your sins and turn to Jesus today. I would love to tell you more about how to do that, so please talk to me.

If you are a Christian, you don't need to fatalistically suffer. God doesn't require us to seek out persecution. If we can peacefully work against totalitarian governments and persecution, we should. But our best efforts to avoid suffering may fail, and that is why we need endurance.

We don't know what we'll encounter in this nation. But we should try to reject a large, Leviathan-like government that promises us security and welfare and everything we need from cradle to grave. Governments like that tend to become beasts. Some people think that if the government regulated everything and gave us a universal income, life would be better. But such governments have been tried out before, and they have failed. We need only look at the Soviet Union. The USSR was officially an atheistic state. While it did not outlaw religion, religious leaders were killed, and religion was marginalized. According to Paul Froese,

Atheists waged a 70-year war on religious belief in the Soviet Union. The Communist Party destroyed churches, mosques, and temples; it executed religious leaders; it flooded the schools and media with anti-religious propaganda; and it introduced a belief system called “scientific atheism,” complete with atheist rituals, proselytizers, and a promise of worldly salvation.<sup>12</sup>

The number of Russian Orthodox churches was 54,000 in 1914, 39,000 in 1928, and 4,200 in 1941.<sup>13</sup> In the first five years of Soviet power, over 1,200 Russian Orthodox priests were killed.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Communism and the USSR failed. But it did great harm. True believers remained in Russia, but their lives were hard, and many were persecuted.

Christians suffer in other beastly nations today, often ones that are totalitarian. We can easily think of North Korea. However, while Communist China has certain freedoms, it tries to suppress biblical Christianity. It does a very efficient job of tracking its citizen to monitor their behavior. In our era of smart phones and a digital society, it would be very easy for our government to track us, to see if we obey its commandments and believe in its secular creeds. And if the government continues to grow in size and power and become more godless, Christians could suffer badly here.

Christians, we must not put all our hope in government. We must not expect the government to give us everything we need. We shouldn't expect the government to be the church, making disciples and advancing the gospel. It would be better for us to have a smaller government, because governments have a way of growing, and when they grow, they have more power, rarely for good and often for ill. Too often, people forget that the government has the power of the sword, the power to fine, imprison, and even kill people who don't go along with their agenda. We shouldn't desire an omniscient state, because such a state would be very competent in being a terrible beast.

But whether our government becomes more beastly or not may be beyond our control. What we can control is whether we're following Jesus today. In a recent book warning about totalitarianism, Rod Dreher says that one of our culture's great lies is “that personal happiness is the greatest good of all.” If we believe that, “then we will surrender at the first sign of trouble.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Froese, “Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 1 (2004): 35.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 42.

<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_the\\_Soviet\\_Union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_the_Soviet_Union).

<sup>15</sup> Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York: Sentinel, 2020), 182.

God has told us there will be trouble. So, how do we prepare for a day of trouble? By following Jesus now. Read the Bible. Pray. Continue worshiping and fellowshiping with Christians. Obey the law of Christ. Dreher says, “The kind of Christians we will be in the time of testing depends on the kind of Christians we are today.”<sup>16</sup> Don’t believe the beast and its lies. Don’t fall for the cheap, knock-off “miracles” of the dragon and the beast. Instead, look to the Lamb. Hear his voice and follow him.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 204.