

The Unholy Trinity
(Sermon 21 – Rev. 13)
3.19.17

Please turn in your Bibles to Revelation 13.

This past Christmas, some dear friends gave my family and I the gift of admission to an escape room. In case you're wondering, we did escape. Eventually. But we had loads of fun in the process.

If you've never done an escape room, you and your party are placed in a room with different clues and mysteries you have to solve within a certain time limit. And the clues go in a particular order. You can't move on until you figure them out one at a time. And then there were some clues that once they were solved, other rooms would open and other things we didn't know before were finally made clear.

Now even though we did figure out the final clue, we needed lots of help along the way. And when we got stuck on a certain problem, there was a button on the wall we could press. Someone outside the room would hear our question, and then they would type on a screen other clues to help us.

Finally, in the end, we figured out the final clue, (after they generously gave us some extra time), and the door opened, to thunderous applause. Mainly us clapping for ourselves.

Going through the book of Revelation can feel like that sometimes. Unlocking one clue or symbol leads to the understanding of another. But let us not be mistaken - we cannot truly understand anything in Scripture without lots of extra help. We need the Holy Spirit to give us understanding and wisdom and insight.

And certainly, the closer we get to the return of Christ, we will need more and more help to not only understand what is happening around us, but also how to know what is of God and what is not, to grow in our awareness of the truth as well as be alert for the deceptive schemes of the enemy.

Therefore, the church must continually grow in wisdom and discernment, to be rooted in God's word, full of the Spirit, and bold with our witness. In fact, that's the main summary of the message today:

<p><i>PROP: As end-time deceptions grow, so must the discernment of the Church.</i></p>
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Back in ch. 12, we were introduced to the dragon, representing Satan Himself. And here in ch. 13, we get introduced to two of Satan's agents, his evil counterparts who carry out these attacks on the church. But most of all, ch. 13 is here to remind the church not to be deceived by the devil's devices. God wants us to know who our enemy is, to discern his ways so that we would not be deceived, and so that we may warn others and point them to Christ.

We'll start by reading Revelation 13:1-10, and then we'll pray...

Revelation 13:1-10

[1] 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. [2] 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.

[3] 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. [4] 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?"

[5] And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. [6] It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

[7] 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, [8] and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

[9] If anyone has an ear, let him hear: [10] 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.

(Let's Pray)

The devil does not create anything. He simply distorts what God created. The devil takes what God has done and perverts it.

This perversion, this parody of God by the devil, is the pattern we see here in Rev. 13. Just as there is a Holy Trinity of Father, Son, Holy Spirit, we are

introduced in our text today to a perversion of that - the unholy trinity of the Dragon, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet.

Now lots of questions have been asked of this chapter in Revelation. Who is the Antichrist? Who is the False Prophet? Are they figures in history or in the future? What does the number 666 really mean?

While we may not have definitive answers to all these questions, let's remember what is clear from this part of God's word. It is clear that the devil is real. It is clear that he has agents on this earth – right now – who are opposing God and opposing the church. These agents are deceptive. It takes discernment to know what is of God and what is not. And it is clear that the devil's power is limited and his time is short, because God is sovereign over all, and Jesus wins in the end.

With that, our text can be broken down into two parts:

- v. 1-10 – the beast that comes out of the sea (Antichrist)
- v. 11-18 – the beast that comes from the land (the False Prophet)

I. The First Beast – the Antichrist
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(13:1-10)

In Hebrew culture the sea represented chaos and judgment. So this beast is coming out of chaos, of seemingly uncontrolled power and brute force.

And this beast is described as having 10 horns and seven heads, with 10 crowns on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. Horns represent power and crowns represent authority. Notice this is almost identical to the description of the dragon back in 12:3. This beast is functioning with the power and authority of the dragon, who is Satan. So, you have the Dragon, (or Satan), then you have the Antichrist, who represents the devil's military and political power.

Now who is this Antichrist? Is he someone in the past, or someone in the future? I think the answer is both.

Remember in John's historical context, the Roman Empire was the greatest power on earth, and it was often the agent of persecution against the church. Because of that, some scholars have suggested that these 7 heads represent Rome. Another evidence is that Rome was known as the city set on 7 hills.

And John's description of the Antichrist includes the appearance of a leopard, a bear, and a lion. This is connected back to Daniel 7 and his vision of four beasts and the governments they represented:

- The Lion = Babylonian empire
- The Bear = Median empire
- The Leopard = Persian empire
- 4th beast = Greek or Roman empire

So, on one level, this beast likely represents the governments of men that have opposed God's people through history. In John's context, that was Rome.

Next in v. 3, we read that one of the heads of this beast has suffered a mortal wound, but he miraculously recovered. What does this mean? Historically, it could be referring to one or all of these kingdoms of men who oppose God keep falling, but they keep rising up in another form to continue to persecute the church.

From the beginning of history, powers have risen over and over in violent opposition against God and His people. Pharaoh was killed, but then the Jews faced the Assyrians. Then the Babylonians. Then the Medo-Persians. Then the Greeks, the Romans, then in WW2 the Jews were persecuted by the Germans, over and over through history.

So, while it's likely that John has a particular person in mind when identifying the Antichrist, the bigger meaning would include the spirit of antichrist that has existed from the beginning.

1 John 2:18

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.

From the time the church began in the book of Acts, to right now, there have been many "antichrists", (plural) - many rulers and governments that have persecuted the church. And the closer we get to Christ's return, we will see that intensify. To the point that just before Christ's return, there will be a specific governmental power (probably many joined as one), and one final leader that will arise and embody the spirit of Antichrist in persecuting the church.

And John says the Antichrist deceives the nations. People look on his miraculous recovery from a mortal wound he receives (likely an

assassination attempt), and they begin to worship him. And at the end of v. 4, they proclaim, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” This is an obvious rip-off of the praise given to God in Exodus 15:11, “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?”

Something else we see from this description of the Antichrist being mortally wounded but recovering: It’s another example of the devil perverting something of God, this time the Antichrist being slain and then appearing to come back to life is meant to be a cheap imitation and mockery of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This reminds us that to be “anti” Christ is not only against Christ, but one who tries to substitute and take the place of Christ.

And in these verses, we learn of a couple of specific characteristics of the Antichrist...

A. Antichrist is full of blasphemy.

[5] And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. [6] It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

Remember that during John’s time, the Roman Empire was persecuting the church. Part of that persecution was connected to emperor worship:

- Augustus Caesar was the first Roman emperor to be considered deity by his followers during his lifetime.
- Nero was called “savior of the world” on his coins.
- The Roman senate regularly declared dead Roman Caesars to be divine.
- And in John’s day, the emperor Domitian demanded to be called “Our lord and god”.

So it is easy to see the connection between the blasphemies of the Antichrist and the emperor worship of John’s time.

And remember this 42 months, (or 3.5 years) is a symbolic time period when the church will be persecuted, the time between Jesus’ resurrection until His Second Coming. The Antichrist described here is a government leader, full of blasphemy, declaring himself to be god, that has opposed

God's people from the beginning, and will continue and intensify until the second coming of Christ.

Another characteristic of the Antichrist is...

B. Antichrist persecutes God's people (v. 7-10)

[7] 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, [8] and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

Here we begin to see the clear division of 2 camps – those who worship the beast and those who worship Christ. There is no in-between. You either belong to Jesus, or you belong to the devil.

And the Antichrist focuses his attacks on the followers of Jesus, those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life *before the foundation of the world*. God planned for Christ to die from the very beginning. And before you were ever born, God planned to save you. He chose you before you ever chose Him.

So right there in the midst of the horror and persecution of the Antichrist, God is reminding His people He knows us by name, and we are secure in Him.

And that's how this section ends...

[9] If anyone has an ear, let him hear: [10] 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.

This basically means, "If anyone will be taken captive and killed during this time, it will be the Christian. Have faith and endure."

As we've seen throughout Revelation, God's people suffer. They suffer at the hands of ungodly men and ungodly governments, with the devil behind it all. But even though the devil is behind it all, God is over it all. God is the one who is Sovereign and in control. Let that give us courage and faith as God's people as we endure hardship for the name of Christ.

So, we can summarize these first 10 verses by seeing this Antichrist as one who represents the ruling governments that have oppressed God's people, with the Roman Empire being the one in John's time, and also a political leader in the future who will persecute the church just before Christ returns.

But there's more in this vision. The Antichrist has a partner. We now meet the second beast, also known as the False Prophet...

II. The Second Beast – the False Prophet	(13:11-18)
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[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.

Unlike the first beast with 10 horns, this one only has 2 horns like a lamb. This is meant to convey the appearance of gentleness, harmlessness. But he speaks like a dragon, meaning his words are wicked and deceptive. He does Satan's bidding. He looks harmless, but he is deadly. So, if the first beast (the Antichrist) is the devil's military leader, then the second beast (the False Prophet) is his religious leader.

This reminds us of Jesus' warning to watch out for wolves in sheep's clothing, those who would claim to be prophets of God, but are actually mouthpieces for the devil.

And that is this False Prophet's main job – to appear harmless and speak seductive, deceptive words, convincing the masses to worship the first beast – the Antichrist.

And in our text we see these characteristics described of the false prophet...

A. The false prophet displays deceptive power.

[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.

So this false prophet, this representation of false religion, uses satanic power to perform what appears to be miracles, like making fire come down from heaven. This is another perversion of what God did through the prophet Elijah in the OT. The false prophet points to the mortal wound of the Antichrist and his false resurrection, trying to deceive people into thinking he is the real Christ.

And apparently, the false prophet even sets up an image, or perhaps a statue of the Antichrist, and causes it to come to life and talk. Just more satanic parlor tricks to deceive people.

We know that God still does miracles today. But too many Christians are chasing signs and wonders. Just because something looks miraculous does not mean it is from God. We must be a discerning people, not chasing miracles, but a people who are rooted in the unchanging truth of God's Word. Beware the voices, especially from church pulpits, who speak soothing words, and tell you how awesome you are, and how to be successful and happy, but never deal with sin, never preach on repentance, never point you to the cross, never hold up the Gospel as the only answer and Jesus as the only way.

So, if the Antichrist is a symbol of man-made government, the False Prophet is the symbol for man-centered religion. The Antichrist uses political and military might to persecute the church. The False Prophet uses spiritual propaganda and wears the mask of religion to do it.

What we are seeing here is Satan's age-old pattern, his usual mode of operation. Persecute God's people by using both the secular and the sacred – by using governmental powers and religious leaders to attack the true Church.

And this is also more evidence of a perversion of the Holy Trinity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three distinct Persons, One God, working in perfect unity. The Father authors the plan of redemption, the Son enacts that plan, and the Holy Spirit shines a spotlight on the Son and points all glory to the Son and to the Father.

In a perversion of the Trinity, the Dragon authors this plan of destruction. The Antichrist comes and enacts that plan by brute force, all the while

mimicking a resurrection from the dead. And the False Prophet points the masses to the Antichrist, promoting him to be worshiped.

A second characteristic of the False Prophet...

B. The false prophet demands conformity.

[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.

Again we see more parody, more perversion of something God created. Back in Rev. 7, God sealed His people with a mark on their foreheads. Now we see the False Prophet sealing all *his* people with the mark of the beast. And to say they were marked on their heads and hands represents the beast's ownership over people in their thoughts and their deeds.

Again, we can assume John is pointing to someone specific in his time, as well as pointing toward something in the future.

In John's time, during Roman rule, you had to declare allegiance to Rome and to Caesar. Depending on which emperor was ruling, you had to also declare that Caesar is god. For instance, by the time of the Emperor Trajan, to refuse to worship the emperor was a death sentence. This led to large-scale slaughter of Christians that took place just a few years after John wrote Revelation.

So it's likely the False Prophet is a figure of Roman emperor worship in John's time, while also pointing forward toward the end times, and another figure, another False Prophet that will arise to deceive the nations just before Christ returns.

Now, what about this number 666? What does this mean? Since no one will be able to buy or sell without it, some have speculated that the mark of the beast will be a barcode. Others say it will be a microchip implanted in our hands or our foreheads that will take the place of currency in the future.

I don't think it's either of those. What John has in mind here is not some future technology. That would make no sense to the 7 churches John is

writing to. As we've seen, there is a present reality in John's context in the 1st century church.

And while we can't know for sure what this number is, we do have some hints from John's time. There was a common practice in Hebrew culture called "gematria" (guh-MAY-tree-uh). This was the practice of assigning letters to corresponding numbers. For example, the Greek alphabet had certain sounds that were also the sounds of certain numbers. So, for any name in the ancient world, you could calculate a number for a name.

That would seem to be the meaning of the end of v. 17, "***the name of the beast or the number of its name.***" So, the number 666 is the name of the Antichrist in numeral form. It would seem that John has a specific name in mind, and he's relaying it to his readers in coded terms.

Some have suggested it is the first initial of each Roman emperor from Julius Caesar to Vespasian. Some say it is the Greek translation of the Latin name of the Roman emperor Domitian, who demanded every person in his empire declare Caesar is god before they could buy or sell anything. Still others believe the mark of the beast is translated to be Nero, one of the most wicked, perverse rulers of Rome, who also persecuted the church.

Yet another theory is that the number 666 is not a literal name, but instead represents the number of man. All through Revelation, the number 7 represents perfection. Six is imperfection. If 777 would be the perfection of God, then 666 would be the repeated imperfection and failure of man, always trying to be god, but facing failure upon failure upon failure.

So is the mark representing a literal person in John's time, a literal person in the future, or does it represent the arrogance of ungodly leaders throughout history who have opposed God and persecuted the church?

I think it's all of the above.

-This seems to point to a specific leader that John's readers would be able to identify so they would resist his mark, his deception.

-I think the Antichrist and the False Prophet also represent the failed systems of man-centered government and man-centered religion.

-And I believe this points to a specific future leader, one who will emerge just before Christ's 2nd coming, a political leader using the power of

government and military, along with his minister of propaganda – the false prophet – speaking smooth flattery and deception to the religious world, all for the purpose of deceiving the nations and persecuting the real church of God.

The Apostle Paul identifies him as the “man of lawlessness”, a specific leader to watch for in the end times...

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God.

(2 Thessalonians 2:3-4)

This connects John’s warning to the church of the 1st century, to the church of today. The warning is the same: Christian, prepare to be persecuted. Governments will oppose you. Religious leaders will oppose you. Satan is behind the persecution. And it will grow in intensity the closer we get to Christ’s return.

But remember, church. All of these evil efforts from an unholy trinity to try and defeat God’s people will come to nothing. Satan fights, but Jesus wins.

So stand strong. Endure suffering. Don’t be deceived by man-centered religion, man-centered worship. Anything that exalts man does not exalt God. Anything that worships man is actually worship of the devil. You cannot serve two masters.

And that’s why we have to prepare now – not only to suffer when persecuted, but we need to guard ourselves against trusting in any leader or politician who claims they are the answer. When election times roll around, vote your conscience, but never put your hope in a candidate. Never trust in the systems of man to save. Keep your hope in the only one who saves and delivers, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Remember, ***as end-time deceptions will grow, so must the discernment of the Church.*** Be on guard. Deception is dangerous only if it is believable, only if it is not obviously deceptive.

So let us stay vigilant. Let us continually study and consume the truth of God’s word. Let us be full of the Holy Spirit. Let us continually encourage

one another in fellowship and discipleship to keep our eyes on Christ, to see Him as our treasure and our hope.

And when deception or persecution comes, we will be able to stand, through the fiercest battles, through the worst persecution, through the most deceptive philosophies of man. We will know the truth and the truth will set us free.

(Let's Pray)