

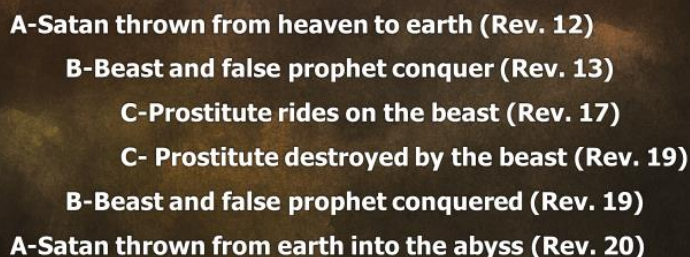
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12 PENTECOST FIRST, MARSHALL
 AUGUST 26/27, 2017 PR. SCOTT FULLER
 Revelation 13:11-18; Revelation 19:11-16; Matthew 24:29-35
Bad Beasts and a Wonderful Word

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the last half of Revelation, John completes his vision of how Satan and his evil associates are defeated. He frames the story in a sort of chiasm – a literary device in which a sequence of ideas is presented, A-B-C, and then repeated *in reverse order*, C-B-A, which gives the story a very nice balance.



A-Satan thrown from heaven to earth (Rev. 12)
B-Beast and false prophet conquer (Rev. 13)
C-Prostitute rides on the beast (Rev. 17)
C- Prostitute destroyed by the beast (Rev. 19)
B-Beast and false prophet conquered (Rev. 19)
A-Satan thrown from earth into the abyss (Rev. 20)

Once we see these evil characters start to fall before the forces of heaven, then our confidence as readers is meant to grow. Though bad things will always happen to us, we can be sure that God and the Lamb will triumph over every evil...

It is the Lord's wonderful promise that one day God will wipe every tear from our eyes... *You can trust me on this*, says the Lord, *I give you my **Word!***

Now, in a literary or entertainment sense, the story of Revelation is a precursor to some very famous 20th Century sagas of the struggle between good and evil.

In books like Tolkien's trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, and C.S. Lewis' seven-part series called The Chronicles of Narnia, and in movies like the

wildly successful Star Wars series, we get a mythical or visual flavor of the scope of the battles that unfold in the book of Revelation.



From under the earth to the sky up above, and from isolated individuals to massive armies, and from skirmishes between humans to conflicts between heavenly beings, John makes this point very well: no one, of any time, of any place, of any type...can remain neutral in the struggle between good and evil.

What's also common among such dramas...is the plot. A righteous remnant of good people dedicate their lives to doing what needs to be done to fight evil – even to the point of giving their lives so that others might live.

They almost always face an enemy that appears to be unstoppable in its power and reach. The brave few do the best that they can, but theirs appears to be a forlorn hope. It seems to be just a matter of time before the overwhelming force of their foe will wipe them out...

So it is in the book of Revelation. Each cycle from the top of the circle to the bottom brings us readers to the brink of despair, certain that nothing can stop the onslaught of suffering caused by evil.

But here's exactly where theologian Craig Koester's advice kicks in. He urges those who journey through the book of Revelation to ***just keep reading, keep turning those pages!*** For, as the graphic in your bulletin shows, every bottom of the circle will draw us back up to the top, back up into the throne room of Almighty God where the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign.

But today we start out at the bottom of the circle in chapter 13. There we encounter what feels like the most infamous evil enemy from John's Revelation: the prophet to the beast whose number is 6-6-6.



Now, our culture has connected this numeral with the *antichrist*, though that word never appears in the book of Revelation. Still, we can't help but stumble on the number 666 – it has become engrained in our cultural consciousness about the trials at end of the world.

Two things to note here: there are actually two beasts mentioned in chapter 13 – the first one rises up out of the sea and has blasphemous (which means irreverent or ungodly) names on its heads. The second beast, mentioned in v. 11, is the false prophet spokesperson and enforcer of the first beast's self-serving laws.

So let's begin our look at this strangely numbered enemy of God by taking a step back and looking at references to the number 7 in John's Revelation. In chapter 1 you remember, John meets the Son of Man standing in the middle of 7 golden lampstands holding 7 stars...



Later we're told that the 7 stars are the angels of the 7 churches and the 7 lampstands are the 7 churches. So 7 is one of the good numbers, right? – our culture even recognizes *old lucky #7*.

7 is also a good number in the **New** Testament. In Matthew 18, Peter asks Jesus, *Lord, how many times must I forgive my brother who sins against me...seven times?* Peter's being very generous and pious to use that holy number – the unspoken law was that one only had to forgive a neighbor 3 times. So I'm guessing that Jesus smiled at his friend as he said, *No...not 7 times...but 70 times 7!*

Even moreso, in Jewish numerology, the number 7 is **perfect**. Says a rabbi: *the number 7 represents wholeness and completeness. After 7 days, the world was complete. (Also) there are six directions in our world: north, south, east, west, up and down. Add to them the place where you are, and you have a total of 7 points of reference.* Plus, a multiple use of the number, as in 77 or 777, intensifies its completeness or perfection.

-(http://judaism.about.com/library/3_askrabbi_o/bl_simmons_seven.htm)

With those glasses on, what do you see when you look at the number 6?

It appears to be somewhat incomplete, not quite good enough, maybe a pretender at being the best. As such, it's a number to be despised for failing to be perfect. Basically John's telling us that 666 (the number of the beast's prophet) is the perfect number for the pretender to the throne of God.

So let's say that 666 *is* the mark of the **antichrist**. I've always heard – or imagined – that the antichrist will be a person, right? That:

-it will appear **good** on the outside, but will be **evil** to the core...

-it will speak of **good** things, but *twist* them in evil ways...

-that its **popularity** with the **masses** will soar, while only a **few** will know the terrible truth, and **they** will be ruthlessly destroyed.

That's a scary proposition for many reasons, but especially in this regard: one of our biggest fears is being taken advantage of...financially, relationally, spiritually – it doesn't matter – we don't want to be led astray.

A number of years ago, a study came out that had asked the question: *What is the most respected profession in your community?* **Any idea which job was at the top of the list of people who engender the most trust? Take a guess...** *Pharmacists... Pastors* were lucky to make it in the top ten – I think we were at 7 or 8.

Do you know who was at the top of the list people WISHED they could trust? Their car mechanic! We don't want to be taken advantage of or led astray... It's a truth we see also reflected in the pages of Scripture.

Think back to the story of John the Baptist. He's that fiery, prophetic precursor to his cousin Jesus.



He started out in the desert calling everyone to repent of their sinful ways and return to a right relationship with God. And he did not care whose toes he stepped on. He even called out Herod, the King of Judah, for taking his brother's wife as his own.

So what often happens to people like that who are not afraid to speak *truth to power*? John was thrown in prison, and I'm pretty sure that he – and everyone else – knew that his days were numbered.

In fact, I'm guessing that urgency makes him even more zealous than ever for Jesus to step up to the plate, crack the whip, to seize his popularity with the people and use it to make some changes for the better. Yet, from the days when John first proclaimed Jesus to be *the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*, his cousin has not exactly lit the world on fire. The Lord draws huge crowds...but he doesn't organize them to protest against injustice. He has a loyal band of followers...but he doesn't teach them how to fight for what they believe in.

So it appears that John starts giving in to despair, wonders if his work was all in vain, is worried about the slow pace of Jesus' plan to take the ball and run with it. In fact, in two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, we're told that:

²In prison, when John heard what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matt. 11:2-5).

In other words, Jesus is saying, *Don't worry, John! Trust in the Word of God. The promises you proclaimed are being fulfilled as we speak.*

This is why the description of the antichrist in our popular culture can be so unsettling. We don't want to mistake the fake for the real thing – especially if it negatively affects our ability to make a difference in helping others discover the truth about God's Word.

So let's take a moment to talk about the *antichrist*. Throughout history there've been predictions of the evil one's identity from the first time that John's Revelation was shared publicly. **Shout out some examples of candidates who've been suspected of fulfilling that foul role...**

I made the mistake of googling "people suspected of being the antichrist." As you might guess, there are endless lists of possibilities, but I limited my picks to 10, which do not include either MARTIN LUTHER or THE POPE because they were both too obvious. So here we go:

1-Napoleon Bonaparte
2-Mikhail Gorbachev
3-Adolph Hitler
4-Bill Gates

5-Ronald Reagan
6-Barak Obama
7-Donald Trump

Again, they're all very obvious choices – someone is going to see them as the epitome of power and distrust them for some reason.

The last three, however, I found to be very interesting:

- The first curious candidate? **A supercomputer** which makes a lot of sense to anyone who saw the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey
- The others are just too fun to ignore: the next one turns out to be the comic actor **Danny DiVito** (I have no idea why!)
- But stranger still, which means it's the most likely suspect, the final option turns out to be **Barney, the cute purple Dinosaur** – because the words **cute purple Dinosaur**, using a twisted formula in Latin, add up to **666**.

So, back to reality, *who might themysterious antichrist actually be???*



What we discover about the evil figure in Revelation 13 turns out to be a bit of a surprise, a rule-changer for many who like to play that “Name the Antichrist” game. Where those who closely watch for clues to identify this demonic presence usually look for someone/thing that is *subtly* evil...that’s not the way it’s portrayed in the book of Revelation.

In fact, there’s nothing subtle or unknowable about the beast at all. It is blatantly powerful and unashamedly obvious. John tells us three things:

- First, it has the ability to rain down fire from heaven, which speaks of absolute military might.
- Secondly, the beast is able to require that its image be worshiped – people are threatened with death for refusing to honor the beast.
- Finally, the beast makes it impossible for anyone to thrive economically without receiving its evil mark (Rev. 13).

So here’s the scenario that’s most believable for me. Many scholars that I trust say that the most likely candidate for the first beast in Revelation 13, is the Roman Empire – which truly ruled the entire world as it was known in those days. Think of a massive army raining down flaming arrows and fire pots catapulted through the air – it would truly look like fire was coming down from heaven.

And the demand that the image of the beast be worshiped? The likeness of the ruler was stamped on their coins, all of them emperors who demanded to be worshiped as gods – under the threat of death. Christians and Jews were killed for refusing to worship such self-proclaimed gods.

Finally, to participate in the Roman economy, everyone who wanted to work, sell or buy had to submit to the Roman way of doing things.

With all that in mind, if the beast is Rom, then, says Koester, the antichrist, the false prophet of the beast, was most likely the Emperor Nero, the one who was infamous for having Christians killed for sport – and whose name *in Hebrew* equals the obvious number...666.

Although Nero was dead by the time John wrote down his Revelation, his twisted persona was the prototype for all the others that were to follow. In fact, this same destructive spirit has continued to live on in other figures throughout history – the 20th Century alone had more than its fair share. Think of brutal dictators like Josef Stalin and Adolph Hitler.

No, there's nothing subtle about the two beasts in chapter 13 – they rule with an iron fist in the very same way that the PAX ROMANA, the *peace* of Rome, was implemented and maintained **with the sword and the cross!** So the threat here is not so much that people will be deceived, but that they will be defeated, not swindled but subdued, not conned but crushed...

And the challenge, under the power of the beast and its prophet, is always to live as people of faith in the one true God...especially in the face of such overwhelming and brutally effective power.

Somewhat ironically, it's oftentimes a strange bit of good news that where Christians are most passionately persecuted...the Church actually thrives. When people have to put their lives on the line for their faith, it kind of clarifies things, doesn't it?

Our problem, here in the good ol' U. S. of A., is the exact opposite – *our* culture simply *seduces* us into thinking:

- that we can be servants of God and...live like royalty,
- that we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus and...still indulge every fantasy,
- that we can honor the Word of God with our lips and ignore the cries of our neighbors in need.

Says Dr. Koester, *John sought to startle the Christians who thought that the best way to get along in pagan society was to accommodate its practices under the assumption that it was all quite harmless. Through his imagery, John warns, **Beware, it is (Emperor) Nero all over again**...*(Revelation, p. 133).

So the question for us is simple: how does the message of Revelation – or any part of the Bible for that matter – how can these centuries-old prophecies, stories, and teachings be applicable to our lives today? In short, how does God's Word continue to speak the truth to us about life and faith?



A professor at the seminary explained it this way. He said that it's kind of like driving into the mountains. When you see them off in the distance, the first hills look – sturdy and tall – and they are. But you soon realize that further up and further in are other mountains that you couldn't see before.

In a similar way, a prophet, a disciple, an apostle speaks a Word from God to a specific people at a specific time and place – and the Word is true. Years later, the Holy Spirit speaks those same words through someone like St. Augustine, and the Word is true again.

And so it continues, through people like Martin Luther and John Calvin, through your grandparents and Sunday School teachers, through Pope Francis, various pastors, neighbors and friends. God's Word is always being

made new in our lives through the Holy Spirit, who will do so until the day when Christ comes again.

So it is with a sense of relief that we finally read in Revelation, chapter 19, about the Faithful and True rider on a white horse whose robe is dripped in blood, and whose name is THE WORD OF GOD.



Against him and his heavenly host are gathered the beast and the false prophet, along with all the kings of the earth and their armies...and this epic battle between the forces of evil and the Word of God...is over before it even begins.

Hardly have the battle lines been drawn before we're told in the very anticlimactic language of 19:20...*And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet...* That's it – game over – the beast is gone, the antichrist is gone, the armies of the enemies are gone – because of the One who is called, The Word of God...Not a shot was fired – the ***Faithful and True*** rider simply speaks God's Word...and the battle is won.

It reminds me of that hymn A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, verse 3 states:

Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us,

We tremble not, unmoved we stand; they cannot overpower us.

Let this world's tyrant rage; in battle we'll engage!

His might is doomed to fail; God's judgement must prevail!

One little word subdues him.

One little word subdues him... To my knowledge, Luther never told us what the “little word” it is that destroys the powers of evil...but here’s my guess. It’s from Philippians 2, verses 10 and 11. Writes the Apostle Paul,

*At the name of **Jesus** every knee shall bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Jesus is the Word of God, the only word that can defeat the powers of evil. May God’s Spirit help keep that wonderful Word on our lips and in our hearts every day of our lives. Amen.