



Catalog No. 1521

Revelation 13:1-10

21st Message

Bernard Bell

July 31st, 2005

T.REX

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Next Saturday marks the 60th anniversary of dropping the atomic bomb over Hiroshima. Within just ten days, World War II was over. The war is long behind us but the debate over the bomb is not. Was America justified in dropping the bomb? For nearly six years the Allies had fought an axis of three nations, each headed by a totalitarian ruler in whose person was concentrated power and authority: Hitler over Germany, Mussolini over Italy, and Hirohito over Japan. The Führer, Il Duce and the Divine Emperor received the adulation and loyalty of their people. Not content to have total rule only at home, they sought to expand their empires in offensive war. What response is permissible in the face of such evil? How far can the state go? In mid-1945 Japan showed no sign of surrender, and plans were being made for the invasion of Japan. Was America justified in responding with such power? Beyond that question, and regardless of how you answer it, is it permissible for Christians to respond to evil with power? How should Christians respond to evil? How far can they go?

Two weeks ago we looked at the problem of evil and God; evil is present in the world because Satan is present. We are not told where evil or Satan originated. What we are shown, over and over again, is that God is sovereign over both. Last week we looked at the problem of why Christians suffer evil even though Christ has already conquered Satan, sin and death. The saints suffer because Satan is hopping mad that he no longer has access to God's throne room and that he can't destroy the Church. God allows Satan to pursue the saints, allowing him even to call up reinforcements. How are Christians to respond to these Satanic attacks as the dragon pursues the saints? The nature of these attacks and the Christian's response to them will be our topic for the next two weeks as we look at Revelation 13.

A. The Dragon's Assistants (13:1a)

And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. (Rev 13:1a NIV)

This statement serves as a transition between chapters 12 and 13. The versions are divided on whether it is the last sentence of chapter 12 (Greek, NRSV, HCSB) or the first sentence of chapter 13 (NASB, NIV, ESV). Either way, it is important to recognize that chapters 12 and 13 are tied together. In chapter 12 the dragon Satan made a four-fold assault on God's kingdom. Three of those assaults were thwarted by God: Satan could not prevent the enthronement of the Messiah, he could not retain his place in heaven there to accuse the saints, and he could not destroy the Church. But God allows him to proceed in his fourth assault, his pursuit of the saints. Satan does not overtly attack the saints. Instead he works through two intermediaries.

John sees the dragon standing beside the sea. Throughout the Bible the sea represents chaos that threatens to overwhelm the order of God's world. In Revelation the sea is the same as the Abyss, the antithesis of Heaven. In the War of the Worlds, earth is in the middle between Heaven and the Abyss. Both Heaven and the Abyss have colonies on earth, and both seek to expand those colonies. Which side will prevail? The dragon stands beside the sea, the Abyss, to

summon up two henchmen to assist him in his pursuit of the saints: the beast from the sea, hereafter known simply as the beast (13:1-10), and the beast from the land, henceforth known as the false prophet (13:11-18).

B. The Beast (13:1b-8)

First John is shown the nature of the beast:

And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" (13:1b-4)

Even people otherwise unacquainted with Revelation know that the book contains a beast whose number is 666. Everyone wants to know the identity of this beast and the nature of his mark. The tendency is to look around the world today for someone we can label as the beast, someone whose name means 666. But why does John use the imagery of a beast? For the answer we need to return to John's sourcebook, the Old Testament, and specifically to the book of Daniel.

In Daniel 7, the prophet saw a series of four beasts emerge from the sea: a winged lion, a bear, a leopard with four wings and four heads, and a ten-horned beast which was unlike the other three, indeed unlike any known beast, so terrifying and frightening and very powerful was it (7:3-7). Daniel is told that "The four great beasts are four kingdoms that will rise from the earth" (7:17). There is widespread agreement on the identity of the first three kingdoms. The lion represents Babylon, one of whose motifs was the winged lion. The bear represents Persia which conquered Babylon in 539 B.C. The leopard represents the empire of Alexander the Great who swept swiftly through the Persian Empire in 334-331 B.C. Alexander died as a still young man in Babylon and his empire was carved up between four successors. There is disagreement on whether the fourth beast represents the Seleucid Empire or Rome; I personally favor its identification with the Seleucid Empire. What are these beasts doing in Daniel 7?

The Book of Daniel is all about the conflict between God's Kingdom and the kingdoms of the earth. Daniel was one of the Jewish exiles in Babylon. What had happened to God's kingdom on earth? The temple was destroyed, the king dethroned, the people taken captive. God's kingdom had been defeated by an idolatrous, pagan kingdom. God's people had no power; the pagan kingdom had all the power. But there was worse to come. Daniel was shown a succession

of kingdoms. Each kingdom seems invincible, but each kingdom will fall, only to be replaced by another one. The fourth kingdom is terrifying beyond description. But still it gets worse. From amongst the ten horns of the fourth kingdom arises a little horn who wages war against the saints (7:21). The saints are handed over to him for a time, times and half a time (7:25).

Meanwhile, Daniel is shown the heavenly court of the Ancient of Days, into whose presence comes one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. "He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting kingdom that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed" (7:14).

Daniel 7 was written to give God's people hope in their suffering and captivity. Their eyes are opened to see realities that are not evident to the naked eye. They are shown the true nature of these kingdoms in whose midst they must spend the next few centuries. These kingdoms are counterfeit kingdoms because they are beastly kingdoms. God's kingdom is to be headed by a human, by one in God's image and likeness. The first such ruler was Adam, commissioned to rule over all creation, but to do so as a steward responsible to God, tending and guarding his garden. The second such ruler was David, the man after God's own heart, the shepherd whom God appointed to shepherd his people. That's God's model for rule over his kingdom. The rulers of these kingdoms are beastly not human. They are counterfeit kingdoms which cannot stand; though they seem invincible they must fall. In their place is coming one like a son of man, a true human being. God will give him an eternal kingdom, and at his feet every knee shall bow. This is the vision which God gave his people through Daniel to enable them to persevere.

You should recognize how similar the message of Daniel 7 is to that of Revelation. The beast which John sees is a composite of the four beasts seen by Daniel. He is the lion, bear, leopard, and ten-horned beast all rolled into one. He is even more powerful and seemingly invincible than the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Seleucid Empires. This is confirmed by his ten horns, seven heads and ten crowns. The horns represent power, the heads authority, and the crowns honor. He has seven and ten of these, for his power and authority seem absolute. In this he is like his master the dragon who has seven heads, ten horns and seven crowns (12:3). This power and authority is given him by the dragon. The beast is the totalitarian ruler *par excellence*. He is *T.rex*, *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the tyrant king, ruler of the world. John's readers at the end of the first century would have recognized this world empire as Rome, the superpower of the day. This is confirmed in chapter 17 where John is told that the beast's seven heads are seven hills. Everyone knows that Rome was built on seven hills. All authority and power was concentrated in the Emperor, who arrogated to himself blasphemous divine titles.

The beast seems to have recovered from a seemingly fatal wound. If we accept the beast as Rome, there are several possible interpretations of this fatal wound. It could be a reference to Nero. After the Senate bravely condemned him as a public enemy, Nero committed suicide. But there was a widespread rumor that he had not really done so; instead he had gone into hiding in the East in Parthia, whence he would return at the head of a great army. In the next few decades several individuals claimed to be the returned Nero. The emperor Domitian, under whose reign I think Revelation was written, was widely regarded as a second Nero.

A second possible explanation of the fatal wound is that it refers to the chaos into which Rome was plunged by Nero's death, which brought an end to the dynasty established by Julius Caesar. In the next year, Rome had four different emperors as army generals competed for the crown. The fourth, Vespasian, held on to power and restored the empire to an even keel. The Roman Empire recovered. Vespasian was succeeded by his elder son Titus, and then by his younger son Domitian, the new Nero.

There is a third possibility. This recovery is typical of Satanic beastly rule. Each beastly empire seems invincible, yet each falls suddenly, only to be replaced by another empire. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Seleucids, Rome, and so the story continues. The beast is Rome, Rome has fallen, but the beast is alive and well. He has continued to raise his tyrannical head. It was naively thought that the First World War was the war to end all wars. But within less than twenty years not just one beast but three beasts had raised their head. These beasts fell, but then from among the Allies, Stalin emerged as a beastly ruler, even more tyrannical than Hitler. And so it continues. The beast seems invincible. After the demise of each manifestation he reappears elsewhere. Because the beast seems to possess all power and authority and because he seems invincible, he and the dragon are worshiped.

More important to John's purpose, the beast is presented as a parody of the Lamb, part of a counterfeit Trinity. The dragon, the beast and the false prophet are counterfeits of the one seated on the throne, the Lamb, and the seven-fold Spirit. The dragon seats the beast on his throne, and gives him power and authority; the dragon and the beast together receive the worship of the inhabitants of the earth. The beast has arrogated to himself blasphemous titles, titles which the Roman emperors bore. The beast's fatal wound, literally "slain to death," is a parody of the Lamb's wound.

"Who is like the beast?" his worshipers ask, and "Who can make war against him?" This parodies the question Israel asked of God after he delivered her from Egypt, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord?" (Exod 15:11). The expected answer to both questions is "No one." No one is like the beast. He is incomparable in his power and authority.

But the alert reader will recognize that John is exposing the beast as the counterfeit Lamb, as the anti-Christ. The beast's throne, authority, power are all counterfeit. The worship he receives belongs to God and the Lamb alone. It is they alone who are worthy to receive all praise. The beast is exposed for who he is to enable the saints to resist him, to enable them to realize that following the beast will necessarily mean forsaking the Lamb.

Next John is shown how the beast rules, or misrules:

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. (13:5-8)

The beast is allowed to exercise his authority for 42 months, that period of time representing the tribulation of God's people. During this period of 3½ years, or 42 months, or 1260 days, the holy

city (Zion, God's people) is trampled upon (11:2), the faithful witnesses (the saints) bear their prophetic witness (11:3) for which they are killed, the woman (God's people) is preserved in the desert (12:6, 14), and the beast wages war on the saints (13:5). I take this as representing the entire Church Age, during which God calls his saints to bear faithful witness in the face of Satanic attack. The individual saints may die, but God preserves the Church. The beast seems to be successful in his war against the saints: he conquers them by death. But the beast cannot conquer the saints by death, because death has already been conquered. The saints have nothing to fear from the first death, mere physical death. Instead it is the saints who emerge victorious, having conquered the dragon and the beast by the blood of the Lamb and by their faithful witness.

Note that the beast was given a mouth to blaspheme, and he was given power to wage war against the saints, and he was given authority over all the inhabitants of the earth. Who gives him this power and authority? On one level it is the dragon who has given power and authority to the beast. But this little word "it was given" is a frequent reminder throughout Revelation that all power and authority rest in the one seated on the heavenly throne. Nothing happens outside his authority.

C. Responding to the Beast (13:9-10)

John does not tell the saints about the beast to pique their curiosity as to the beast's identity. He tells them about the beast in order to give them pastoral counsel, in order to tell them how to live in the midst of a beastly empire. It is vital that we remember that Revelation is a pastoral letter. It is a pastoral letter from Jesus, the Lord of the Church, to seven churches which are representative of all churches. It is a pastoral letter from John to seven specific churches whom he knows and for whom he cares deeply as a fellow sufferer during his exile on Patmos.

John closes with pastoral advice to the saints on how to respond to the beast:

He who has an ear, let him hear.

**If anyone is to go into captivity,
into captivity he will go.**

**If anyone is to be killed with the sword,
with the sword he will be killed.**

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. (13:9-10)

"He who has an ear, let him hear" is a call to listen up, similar to the call at the end of each message to the seven churches, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." What word does John have for the saints?

What he says next is surprising. He uses language drawn from Jeremiah. In response to the false prophets who were assuring the people of Judah that no harm would befall them, that God would never bring judgment upon them, God warned them through Jeremiah that indeed he was planning calamity: captivity and the sword (Jer 15:2). A few years later some of the residents of Jerusalem fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them. God said he would pursue them even to Egypt with captivity and the sword (Jer 43:11). Captivity and the sword were inevitable for God's people because they had forsaken him. John uses this imagery, but with a major difference: God's people again face captivity and the sword, but now it is God's faithful people. The rules seem to have changed. In the Old

Testament, faithfulness to God brought blessing, and faithlessness brought suffering. But under the New Covenant it seems that God has delivered his people not from but into suffering. It is faithfulness to God and to Christ which brings suffering, while faithlessness allows you to save your own skin.

This is a hard word for us to hear. We are committed to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But God doesn't seem very committed to these values for his people. He is quite content to allow them to suffer at the hands of the beast.

How are the saints to respond to the beast and to death? How are the saints to respond to evil? Their response is to be patient endurance and faithfulness, two key terms in Revelation.

The saints are called to faithfulness. We are to be faithful to Jesus Christ even to death. The saints are not to give their loyalty to the beast. John unmasks the beast to enable the saints to see clearly. The Roman emperor did not seem like a beast. True, he demanded the loyalty of his people, and certain emperors demanded adulation as well. Loyalty to Rome brought great advantages. That's why it was so appealing for Christians to soften their witness. But John shows that loyalty to Rome meant disloyalty to Christ. You could not serve two masters. As Hitler rose to power he successfully co-opted much of the German Church. In 1933 he declared the Third Reich, the Third Kingdom, which would last for a thousand years. Biblically-alert Christians should have recognized it as a counterfeit kingdom which would surely fall. The Church failed to see clearly, failed to see the true nature of Hitler and his kingdom. But a few people did, men such as Bonhoeffer and the other founders of the Confessing Church who in 1934 signed the Barmen Declaration. They called for the Church to disassociate itself from Hitler and to remain loyal to Christ. It was a brave and costly stance. The Third Reich did not last for a thousand years; after just a dozen years it fell, but before it fell, many of the Christians who remained faithful to Christ had died.

Secondly the saints are to endure. Remaining faithful to Christ will inevitably intensify the hostility against them. They must endure their suffering. How do you endure? Again we come back to the double throne-room vision of chapters 4-5. God is sovereign, and his chosen path to victory is the path of the slain Lamb. The saints are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the faithful witness, first-born from the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth. His path to the throne lay through death.

What the saints are not to do is respond in kind. They are not to fight back. They are not to agitate and insist on their rights. Yet sadly throughout Church History we see that the Church has frequently chosen power. When the Church chooses the way of power, the Church becomes beastly in turn. That was not the path chosen by the Church in the first few centuries. Remember the quote from Tertullian I read last week. He wrote to the Roman rulers, "The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed."¹ That's how the early church grew.

Our Scripture reading today was from Romans 12:

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

**"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink..."**

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."
(Rom 12:17-21)

I recently came across a remarkable illustration of these verses. A few weeks ago I watched the movie, *To End All Wars*, about Allied prisoners forced by the Japanese during the Second World War to build the so-called Railroad of Death between Thailand and Burma. The movie is based upon a book by Ernest Gordon, a young Scottish officer who worked on the railway.² I was so struck by the movie that I immediately bought the book.

The Japanese captors were brutal beyond description. They did not abide by the Geneva Convention. They viewed their prisoners as expendable labor. Gordon reports, “four percent of prisoners held by the Germans and Italians died, as compared to twenty-seven percent of those in the hands of the Japanese” (48). Here was a regime more brutal, more beastly than even Hitler’s Germany. How would you have responded to the beast?

Ernest Gordon tells a remarkable story. Shortly after arriving in the camp he fell very ill. The Japanese provided no food ration for the sick, and made very limited provision for medical care. Gordon was taken to the “Death House” to die. But, to his astonishment, two men cared for him, nursing him back to health. Their attitude of self-sacrificial love was strikingly different from the other prisoners who had degenerated into a state of each looking out for himself. They were motivated by their deep faith in God. Through their influence a new spirit spread through the camp:

It was dawning on us all—officers and other ranks alike—that the law of the jungle is not the law for man. We had seen for ourselves how quickly it could strip most of us of our humanity and reduce us to levels lower than the beasts. Death was still with us—no doubt about that. But we were slowly being freed from its destructive grip. We were seeing for ourselves the sharp contrast between the forces that made for life and those that made for death. Selfishness, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, self-indulgence, laziness and pride were all anti-life. Love, heroism, self-sacrifice, sympathy, mercy, integrity and creative faith, on the other hand, were the essence of life, turning mere existence into living in its truest sense. (105-106)

After he recovered, Gordon was approached by some Australian prisoners who asked him to lead them in a study of Christianity. They asked him because he was one of the few men with a university education, and because he seemed “real.” Prior to entering the prison camp Gordon had had no interest in God, indeed was put off by what he saw of the church. He finally agreed to teach the men, reckoning that he would learn alongside them.

[T]he thing for me to do was to find out as much as I could about Jesus... Through our readings and discussions we gradually came to know Jesus. He was one of us. He would understand our problems, because they were the kind of problems he had faced himself. Like us, he often had no place to lay his head, no food for his belly, no friends in high places. He, too, had known bone-weariness from too much toil; the suffering, the rejection, the disappointments that make up the fabric of life... As we read and talked, he became flesh and blood. Here was a working-man, yet one who was perfectly free, who had not been enslaved by society, economics, politics or religion. Demonic forces had existed then as now. They had sought to destroy him but they had not succeeded... He had remained free and alive, as the Resurrection affirmed. What he was, what he did, what he said, all made sense to us. We understood that the love expressed so supremely in Jesus was God’s love—the same love that we were experiencing for ourselves—the love that is passionate kindness, other-centred rather than self-centred, greater than all the laws of men. It was the love that

inspired St Paul, once he had felt its power, to write, ‘Love suffereth long and is kind.’ (116-118)

Gordon had come to faith in God and in Christ, but still he struggled over the gospel’s call to forgive our enemies. That would mean forgiving the Japanese captors. Near the end of the war, as a group of Allied prisoners were being moved from one camp to another, their train ended up on a siding alongside a train full of wounded Japanese troops who were suffering terribly.

These were the enemy, more cowed and defeated than we had ever been. Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their ration and a rag or two, and, with water canteens in their hands went over to the Japanese train to help them. Our guards tried to prevent us...But we ignored them and knelt by the side of the enemy to give them food and water, to clean and bind up their wounds, to smile and say a kind word. An Allied officer from another section of the train had been taking it all in. ‘What...fools you all are!’ he said to me. ‘Don’t you realize that those are the enemy?’ ‘Have you never heard the story of the man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho?’ I asked him. ‘But that’s different!’ the officer protested. ‘That’s in the Bible. These are the swine who’ve starved us and beaten us. They’ve murdered our comrades. These are our enemies.’ ...I regarded my comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of our captors had they fallen into our hands. Now these same men were dressing the enemy’s wounds. We had experienced a moment a grace. (197-198)

After liberation Gordon was eager for news of the two men who had nursed him from death’s door. He learned that Dusty Miller had been crucified by a Japanese guard who was driven to an intense hatred of him because he couldn’t break him.

Dusty—the man of deep faith and warm heart—the man who was incapable of a mean act, even against a brutal tormentor. His goodness, it is true, had been recognized, not in sympathy, however, but in hate. Condemned by such radiant goodness, the warrant officer must have gone berserk. There on that tree, like his Master, he died, so far from his homeland, so far from everyone, yet so near to God. (211)

It is this responding to evil with good that saves the Christian from mere fatalism. The Moslem says “Imshallah,” God wills it, and shows indifference. The Buddhist blames suffering on previous sins and will not lift a finger. But the Christian, while saying, “God wills it,” knows that the pattern that God has set is the pattern of the Lamb. He has given his own Son in responding to evil with good. It is chapter 5 which keeps us from viewing the enthroned God of chapter 4 as a remote deity. God is not unconcerned about our suffering. The presence of the slain Lamb on his throne testifies to that.

How are we to respond to evil? With endurance and faithfulness, following in the footsteps of Jesus who walked this path before us. He has shown us how to overcome evil with good. Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.

1. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.

2. Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Previously published as *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (London: Collins, 1963) and *Miracle on the River Kwai* (London: Fontana, 1965).