Stay the Course and Keep the Faith

Revelation 13

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| **Natural Divisions** | * Revelation 13:1-2 A beast resembling a leopard came out of the sea, with seven heads, ten horns, and ten crowns, and he proclaimed blasphemy and was given power and authority by the dragon.
* Revelation 13:3-8 The beast seemed to suffer a fatal head wound but he survived, and he exercised world-wide authority, slander God and persecuting God’s people, and all unbelievers worshipped him.
* Revelation 13:9-10 Although many of God’s people will be taken captive or killed; nevertheless the people of God are to stay the course and keep the faith.
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| **Summary Sentence** | Throughout the church age, anti-Christian governments will attain world-wide authority, and will persecute and conquer God’s people, but Christians are called to stay the course and keep the faith |
| **Central Idea** |  In the face of opposition, we are called to stand firm in faith |

I want to welcome you all back from our Christmas holiday vacation, and commend you all for your perseverance in studying this book. Revelation is hard. It’s the hardest book of the Bible that you’ll ever study. We know that it’s hard because we can look down through the course of history and see that great scholars have reached different conclusions about how they have interpreted this book.

As you have studied the book of Revelation this year, you have seen one view presented in your written Commentary for the course, and I have shared with you a different perspective—a different view—in my lectures.

If you have never studied the book of Revelation before, then that has made it a little harder for you, but ladies, you have stuck with it, and I commend you for that. Good job! Good for you. You are demonstrating a perseverance in delving into God’s Word, and that perseverance—that desire to understand God’s truth—is pleasing to God. Good for you.

For those of you who *have* studied Revelation before, I want to remind you again that there is not just one primary evangelical view of how this book is to be understood. Evangelicals differ in their understanding of this book. And whatever view you hold, there are godly scholars who will differ with you, and who are just as committed to the inerrancy of Scripture as you are, just as passionate about Christ as you are, and who are just as careful in their scholarship as any teacher you have studied under. So I would encourage you to treat with respect those who differ with you in their understanding of the book of Revelation.

And in *our* study of Revelation we want to focus on the central message of each passage. We want to focus on the practical application of God’s Word that may be agreed upon by those who hold any of the various interpretive views.

In our study of Revelation we have seen that the world is not the way it’s supposed to be. There’s death and decay; there’s deception; there’s disloyalty; there’s slander. We see evidence all around of deep-seated evil in our world.

The world is not the way it’s supposed to be. We Christians who seek to honor God and obey Him are a minority in our country, and in our world. The world cultures mostly stand in rebellion against God. God’s majesty is trivialized; God’s standards are ridiculed; God’s commandments are ignored. God’s Savior is rejected and mocked. The world is not the way it’s supposed to be. And as a result of the fall, we are not the people God intended for us to be.

But the Bible teaches that *this* is not the end of the story. There’s a new world coming. God is in the process of building His Kingdom. The Bible proclaims the progressive story of God’s program of redemption—a redemption that will culminate in a new heaven and a new earth free of sin and death. Our world is not the way it’s supposed to be, but there’s a new world coming, and the book of Revelation teaches us about the certainty of that glorious day.

Now although scholars disagree about the meaning of symbols in this book, all evangelical Christians agree about three key themes of this book. Christians agree that there are three key lessons that are taught by this book. Christians do not agree about how to understand the scroll of chapter 5 or the locusts of chapter 9 or the witnesses of chapter 11, but Christians do agree that these three themes are central to the teaching of Revelation.

* First, Revelation teaches the sovereignty of God. Revelation dovetails with the books of Daniel and Isaiah and the Old Testament prophets to teach us that God is sovereign over the rise and fall of nations. God shapes the course of history. God is in control of the rise of world leaders, and God is in control of their defeat and downfall. God is sovereign. Revelation teaches us that.
* The coming Kingdom of God. Revelation gives us assurance that Satan was defeated at the cross. Christ’s death has broken Satan’s power over fallen mankind. When Jesus returns, Satan and his allies will be cast out, and God’s eternal kingdom will come. Jesus will return to raise the dead, to judge the wicked, and to make all things new. The Kingdom of God is coming in its fullness.
* Christians are called to stay faithful until the end. Christians are called to stand firm in their faith. Revelation serves to encourage us that this corrupted world is just temporary, and one day we will enjoy a new world—a perfect world—a world where we will be all that God designed us to be. Revelation also serves an exhortation to us to stand firm in faithful obedience to God. How are we to handle life in a world damaged by pervasive evil? We are to be firm in our faith. We are to continue to live our lives in faithful obedience to the will of God. **When we encounter suffering, we’re to stand firm in our faith**.

These are the three key themes of Revelation. No matter how you interpret the symbols in this book—no matter how you understand the timeline of this book—every evangelical Christian agrees that these are the key themes of this book. Every evangelical Christian agrees that these are lessons we are to learn from the book of Revelation.

Open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 13.

It’s been a while since we’ve been together, so let’s begin with a quick review of where we’ve come in the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation describes a vision that was given by God to the apostle John near the end of the first century. John was told to write a description of his vision and to send that written revelation to seven churches in the province of Asia. This revelation was necessary because Christians in the first century were fearful; they were confused; they were deeply disappointed.

They couldn’t reconcile the reality of a world where evil still prevailed with what they knew to be true about God—that God is good; that God is sovereign; that God could bring in perfect righteousness today, but He hadn’t done it.

The first-century church had an expectation that because they were God’s own children, that they could be confident of God’s protection from any kind of discomfort or disappointment or distress. The first-century believers had an expectation that life would be trouble-free for them because their God—our God—was in control.

But life wasn’t easy for them. Life was hard for them. They were suffering. First-century believers had faced natural disasters, persecution, and even martyrdom. Where was God? It had been sixty years since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the world was still not the way it was supposed to be.

And so, we come to the book of Revelation. The purpose of the book of Revelation is to provide encouragement to Christians who are suffering in this sinful world. This book was given in the first century to comfort God’s people as *they* lived through suffering, but the book is not just for believers in the first century; the book is for believers in every century. This book is relevant for Christians *today* who are living through times of suffering and disappointment.

The last time we were together as a class, we studied the magnificent vision described in Revelation chapter 12. This vision gave us a panoramic view of what is going on spiritually, behind the scenes, between the first coming of Christ and His second coming. In our study in the two weeks before Christmas, we looked at the symbols given to us in chapter 12, and we saw in those symbols the reality of ongoing opposition to God and ongoing hostility towards God’s people from the time of the resurrection of Jesus until the future day of His return.

In the vision described in chapter 12, John saw a pregnant woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of 12 stars on her head. There was an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns standing in front of the woman, intending to devour her child when he was born. But the dragon was not able to destroy the child. The woman gave birth to the child, and Revelation 12 tells us that one day this child will rule all nations with an iron scepter. This child will be the eternal King promised to God’s people. The child is Jesus.

The dragon is Satan—the evil spiritual being who has opposed the work of God since the creation of our world. Although Satan was poised to destroy the promised child, he was not able to do so. And Revelation 12 goes on to teach us that Christ’s death and resurrection was, in fact, a decisive victory over Satan. Satan was hurled down—Satan was cast out of the heavenly realms—and his power to enslave mankind has been broken. Satan still operates in our world, but he operates under restraint.

We learned in Revelation 12 that since the dragon was hurled out of heaven, he has made it his purpose to make war against the people who have faith in Jesus, but Revelation 12 also tells us that the offspring of the woman—Christians—are kept by God in a place of spiritual refuge, where God will take care of them and keep them out of the dragon’s reach.

Christians are under God’s protection. We are spiritually out of the dragon’s reach. Nevertheless, God allows us to face opposition. God allows us to be challenged. God tests us. God strengthens us as we face rejection from those who reject Christ. This is the picture of life in the church age. God is with us, but Satan works in opposition to the people of God.

So how does Satan operate? What is his strategy? What are the weapons that Satan uses to oppose the people of God? That is what chapter 13 tells us.

Look at Revelation 13, verses 1 and 2. *“And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. 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.”*

As we look at the description of the beast in Revelation 13, the first thing we notice about this beast is that in some aspects it resembles the dragon in Revelation 12. Both the dragon and the beast have seven heads and ten horns. They’re not identical, because the dragon has seven crowns on his seven heads, whereas the beast has ten crowns on ten horns. But we see that the beast is in some sense an image of the dragon. This beast is in the spiritual image of Satan.

What would this vision have meant to the first-century readers of the book of Revelation? First-century readers would immediately have been reminded of Daniel’s vision of beasts coming out of the sea in Daniel chapter 7. Daniel had a vision of four beasts coming out of the sea, and these beasts resembled a lion, a bear, a leopard with four heads and then a terrifying beast with ten horns. Daniel 7 tells us that these beasts represented four successive world empires.

The beast of Revelation 13 is like a composite of the four beasts in Daniel. If you squish Daniel’s four beasts together, you get something that has seven heads and ten horns. The beasts of Daniel 7 represent a successive world governments that would rise from the earth. But the fourth beast from Daniel 7 was different from all the others. From the fourth beast would come a series of world powers, and one of those world powers would wage war against the saints and defeat them. That is the wording we find in Daniel, and it matches the wording that we find in Revelation 13.

The seven heads and the ten horns symbolize power. Of all the attributes of God, it is God’s omnipotence that Satan aspires most to have. So we see in Revelation a beast who has been given great authority—authority described as crowns and a throne, and so we see that the beast represents the principle of power politics; he represents the state—governmental authority.

Now we know from Romans 13 that God created the institution of human government. The devil never created anything; he could only pervert what was already there. But what we see as we look over the course of history is that in various places at various times, human government, which was instituted by God for man’s welfare, has become an instrument of oppression.

We are blessed to live in a country that protects our freedom to worship God and serve Him, but in many other parts of the world governments are tyrannical and oppressive. In many other parts of the world, Christian brothers and sisters practice their faith under the threat of persecution, torture, and death.

So it appears that the beast from the sea in Revelation 13 represents world powers that govern in opposition to the authority of God. The beast represents human governments down through the centuries that have ruled as tyrants and have oppressed their people. The beast represents human institutions of power that hold contempt for God and that persecute the church. The beast is operational in the world today because Satan is still at work to shape the thinking of those who do not know God.

The anti-God perspective symbolized by the beast is present throughout the church age; nevertheless, there will be a future expression of the beast that the Bible calls “the man of lawlessness” He will be revealed just prior to the return of Christ. In 2 Thess. 2:3-4, Paul speaks of him this way. *“Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day—the day of the Lord’s return—will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”* There is a man, a man of lawlessness who will be revealed before our Lord returns.

He will be a man whose power appears to mimic the power of God. 2 Thess. 2:9-10 describes his coming this way: *“The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing.”* This man of lawlessness will be the ultimate challenge to the glory of Christ, but 2 Thessalonians tells us that the man of lawlessness will be utterly destroyed by the splendor of Christ’s presence and by the breath of His mouth when Jesus returns. We need not fear him.

Now look at verse 3-4, speaking of the beast. *“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. 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?"”*

The word that is translated *wound* in this passage, is found several times in the book of Revelation, but every other time it is translated *plague* and it carries the connotation of *divine judgment*. This is a mortal blow inflicted by God to the head of the beast. Satan-inspired human authority has already suffered a fatal wound—the judgment of God—and yet it lives on. This, too, is according to the plan of God.

Think back on the book of Genesis. Just after the fall of man, God proclaimed a curse against Satan. God said this: *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”* We learned in our study of Genesis that it is Jesus who has come to crush the head of Satan. Jesus dealt a death blow to the authority and the power of Satan. Jesus crushed the head of the serpent. It happened at the cross.

And yet, the dragon still lives. Although the dragon has been defeated and cast out of heaven, nevertheless he ravages the earth. He still has the ability to wage war against the people of God. The beast, likewise, has been dealt a fatal blow by the cross of Christ, and yet it still has the ability to inspire opposition to the people of God.

But again, we need not fear. The book of Revelation assures us in chapter 12 that God has His people in a place of spiritual refuge—a place where we are out of the dragon’s reach. God has sealed us; God protects us; God nurtures us.

Now look at verse 5: “*The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months.”* I’ve said before that in my view, just as so much of Revelation is expressed in figurative language, I believe that the expressions forty-two months, 1260 days, three and a half years, and time, times and half a time all refer to the duration of the church age—from the time of the resurrection of Christ until the time of His return. And so verse 5 speaks of the activity of world powers hostile to God throughout the church age.

Now look at verses 5-7. “*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 who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.”*

There are two types of people in the world—earth dwellers and heaven-dwellers. The Bible says that we who have trusted Christ are seated with Him in the heavenlies. We are heaven-dwellers. We dwell in heaven, and God dwells in us. People who reject Christ are said to be earth-dwellers, and as they follow the passions of this world, unbeknownst to them, they are serving Satan.

In John’s first epistle, in 1 John chapter 2, the apostle John said this: *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world— the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”*

Look again at verse 7. Verse 7 says that *“*(the beast) *was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.”* The beast was *given* power. This is all according to the plan of God. God *allows* these oppressive powers to rise and fall. God *allows* evil to continue for a time.

There’s no promise of earthly victory for believers here; rather, there’s a promise of defeat. Nevertheless, no matter how bad it seems, it all occurs within the sovereign plan of God. God is still in control.

One day Jesus will return to bring in perfect righteousness, but this is not that day. One day Jesus will return to make all things new, but this is not that day. Until that day we have clear direction about how we are to live.

Look at verses 9 and 10: *“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.”*

The reality of life is that God’s faithful people may suffer. They may be taken into captivity. They may be killed with sword. But in all of these things, God is in control.

Now look at that last sentence again:  *“This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.”* This is our responsibility in the face of suffering. This is how we are to live if the world turns against us. This is what God expects of us. We are to have patient endurance and we’re to be faithful in obedience. **We cling to Jesus. We keep the faith**.

Life on this earth prior to Christ’s return continues to be characterized by trials, suffering, illness, and death. Life may seem hard to us, but this life is just the blink of an eye compared to eternity. The Bible calls the challenges of this life “momentary afflictions,” and the Bible also says that these momentary afflictions are given to us for a purpose. They produce in us an eternal weight of glory.

So as we contemplate the reality of the activity of the beast in our world, what are we to remember? This is what Revelation teaches us.

* God is in control. God is sovereign over all these things
* Our future is secure. We will spend eternity with Him in His kingdom.
* Our job is to cling to Jesus—to remain faithful. We are to continue to live our lives in faithful obedience to the will of God.

Let’s close in prayer.