

## **Revelation 13: Two Beasts & Loyalty**

Pray with me, would you?

### **Prayer:**

### **Locating Ourselves:**

Last week we talked about Revelation 12. That's all I'm saying about it; it's online if you want it. If chapter 12 tells John's first readers how they got to where they are, chapters 13 and 14 tell them the truth about what's going on around them in the Roman Empire. My main hope today is that I can push through the preconceptions we have about this passage, and try to explain it as accurately as I can.

So let's walk through this passage.

### **Walk-Through: vv1-4: The Beast From the Sea**

**1 The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. 2 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. 3 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 filled with wonder and followed the beast. 4 People 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 it?"**

This beast is something! I mean, it's incredible, impressive! But appearances, as John wants us to know, can be deceiving.

What we should really notice is the key statement that "the dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority." The dragon, the devil, stands behind this beast's power. And so much of the beast's descriptions echo how John has already described the Lamb, Jesus. Jesus died and rose again...and the beast had what seemed like a fatal wound, but was healed from. "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against it?" reminds us of the declaration, "Who is like the Lord?" And the answer: "Who can make war against it?" Well..we saw already in both Revelation 11 and 12 that the Lord can make war against it, has already, and won.

What we see is that this beast mimics God's legitimate displays of power and worth. God's power is legitimate; the beast's is a knock-off. An impressive, persuasive one. But it's a knock-off.

This beast from the sea is described as "having ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name." We saw this same language in chapter 12 used to describe the the dragon, the devil. John is doing all he can to help us know that the power that stands behind this beast is the enemy of God.

### ***The Beast From the Sea: Rome***

Now, I am convinced that what John is describing for us when he talks about this beast from the sea is Rome itself. The beast is shorthand for Rome and its emperors, who get

their power from the devil.

John was writing to churches in Asia, a province of the Roman Empire that you reached by leaving Rome, which was a coastal port town, a town “on the sand of the seashore.” You sailed east to get to his churches. Rome and its representatives, especially the governor over the province of Asia, literally “came from the sea.”

In Revelation 17, John will talk about *this* beast as the ride for a woman who is clearly a stand in for the city of Rome. I've added a long discussion on that at the end of the online version of this message. Both in Revelation 13 and 17—and throughout, really—John wants us to see how closely tied together Rome and Satan are. Without the devil, there would be no Empire.

But all of Rome's power that the devil has given it is just a cheap, knock-off version of the real power God has given Jesus. It's pathetic, really. It's already lost to Jesus, but only John's Christians realize it.

### ***Foundations: Nero & Expectations***

Let me just remind us of someone for a moment: the emperor Nero. Nero was a bad guy. He set fire to Rome's ghettos and blamed it on Christians some 30 years before Revelation was written. He killed his political enemies—including his mom and brother: was just an evil guy, a tyrant.

And although he died, many people thought that he hadn't died. That sometime he would show up again, or someone like him, and not come to Rome in Power, establishing it for

all time, or something like that, but come to Rome in destruction, would overcome Rome as a tyrant, and take over the Empire. This was a common expectation that Romans had. Now: whether they thought Nero himself would actually show up, or just someone like Nero is debatable (Keener, 338).

When John mentions in Revelation 13:3 that one of the beast's heads, one of these kings, seemed to have a fatal wound, but didn't, and later, when John in Revelation 17 talks about an eighth king showing up, he's probably talking about this Nero-like character showing up again.

John's churches need to know that the worst of what Rome can do to them hasn't even happened yet. Nero, or one like him, will arrive again before God finally vindicates his people. That's what Revelation 13—and 17, too—promise. John's churches needed to have accurate expectations about their future.

### ***Piling Up:***

So: This beast from the Sea is Rome. And the beast's power, the Roman Empire's power, is a parody, a poor mimicry of God's power as seen best in Jesus. Jesus is triumphant; the beast is a farce; but those who take part in the worship of Rome, of its emperors and its patron gods, they are giving to Rome what should be only given to God and the Lamb.

We see more of this same stuff as we continue.

### ***Was Given Power: vv5-10:***

We won't really look at vv5-10 right now, but it basically highlights that this beast is out of bounds, man:

blaspheming God, working against the Lamb's people. And we see more parody and mimicry, as the beast from the sea, Rome, tries to claim for itself worshippers from every tribe, people, language, and nation, throughout the whole world.

But we know that God is Lord of the Earth, and that the Lamb's worshippers are from among all these. And John also gives his readers an eyes-wide-open look at what keeping Christian faith will cost them. It'll cost them their lives.

But there is another beast in today's passage.

***Walk-Through vv11-15: The Beast From The Land: Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. 13 And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of everyone. 14 Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 It was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.***

We meet a second beast; a beast from the land, or "coming out of the earth" (TNIV). It looks like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon, the devil. One person calls this second beast a "clumsy counterfeit" of the true Lamb (Peterson, Reversed

Thunder, 187, as quoted by Keener, Revelation, 351, n.4).

And the beast from the land is the mouthpiece of the beast from the sea. It causes everyone to worship the first beast, and does all sorts of really impressive tricks to accomplish this. More than that, it sets up this image for people to worship. And of course, worshipping statues in temples was a normal part of most of the world around John's readers. Just a few years before Revelation was written, the Emperor Domitian had set up in a special temple in Ephesus a statue of himself, 24 feet high; not quite as impressive as the 90 ft. statue Nero set up, but what can you do (Keener, 351)? Priests and priestesses of the Imperial Cult would make statues seem to speak, seem to cry, even. A whole field of magical study was focused on trying to bring statues to life so that they could give oracles. Don't take those classes if you need CEUs.

This beast from the land is also the beast from the sea's heavy. It kills those who don't worship the image of the beast from the sea.

Listen: These two beasts are two arms of the Imperial Cult. These two beasts are two arms of the Imperial Cult.

***Beast From the Land: vv11-13:  
Two Arms of the Imperial Cult***

We've talked before about the Imperial Cult. It was the religious institution that focused on worshipping past emperors and the current emperors and their families as gods, as protectors of the Empire.

This was a pervasive part of life in the Roman Empire. And it

functioned on two levels: there was the normal sort of Imperial Cult--any city could throw up a temple or even a small altar or two, with a little priesthood, and take part in this. They would, because it was good for the empire, it was good for the priests, it was good for the participants--have a festival or two, make some friends. This was the local level Imperial Cult: city-based, civic life.

But there was another level, too: the Province-based, Provincial Imperial Cult. Remember that the churches John is writing to are in the Roman Province of Asia. This province was governed by a governor and a council, made up of wealthy men from leading cities. One of the most important roles these men had was to promote worship of the emperor and Rome in the province. It was a huge part of their job.

They would do what they could to earn the right to build special temples in their cities, which was a great honor that the Emperor and the Roman Senate rarely granted. Think of all the cities that yearn for new stadiums or hosting the olympics or something. Think of how great it is to be the city where the state capital is or a denominational headquarters or some seat of power. There's honor and money and glory in having a major provincial temple.

And one of the council members would function as a high priest or priestess in these special provincial temples, who would pay out of their own pocket for the daily sacrifices and their special festivals. This was about as honorable and prestigious a position you could get in the province. The same local, wealthy, upper-class families who held these positions and passed them to their children were the same families who held positions in local governments, who took

part in the local level Imperial Cult, and took part in regular old Pagan worship of Roman gods.

By the time Revelation was written, Rome had allowed three special Provincial Temples to be built in the Province of Asia. These were in the cities of Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus. Remember when John says in his letter to Pergamum early in Revelation? That they dwell where Satan's throne is? He's making a reference to the special temple to Augustus Caesar's son & wife that was established there just 30 years before Jesus came.

My point is this: This beast from the Land is the local beast, the beast from nearby, our Province, Asia. The beast who came from across the sea, from Rome, is the other.

This beast from the land is the embodiment of the Provincial Imperial Cult, the local system of temples and altars and festivals and holidays and parades and worship that kept the Province tied to Rome and brought glory and honor and power to its Emperors, and to the local elite as well. The council of the Province of Asia functioned as a propaganda arm for the worship of Rome and its Emperor.

As John puts it, this "second beast" "performed on behalf of the first beast."

Two beasts, one from the land one from the sea. The beast from the land, the Provincial arm of the Imperial Cult, drives everyone to worship the beast from the Sea, Rome itself, wholly powered by the devil.

Got it? Two beasts; two arms of the Imperial Cult. But the Beast of the Land does other things, too.



## **Marks 1: vv16-18:**

***It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, 17 so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.***

***18 This calls for wisdom. Let those who have insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.***

Now: what do we know? We know that those who are in the Lamb's book of life are sealed by God. In Revelation 7, God had placed a seal on the foreheads of 144,000 faithful witnesses--a number that was just perfect in every way, pointing out the quality of these people, and their just-right sort of number. And the mark that today's passage mentions is the opposite of the seal that Jesus' faithful followers get.

We also know that this number, 666, is "the name of the beast or the number of the name." This is straight up a riddle, an invitation to solve the number that we're given. People in the ancient world ate this stuff up. Remember that both Greek & Hebrew characters had numerical value. There was a popular Jewish work that referred to a whole bunch of Roman Emperors by number (Bauckham, Climax of Prophecy, 385, cited by Keener, Revelation, 355 @ n.29).

Most people see this "666" number as a reference to the name "Nero Caesar," written in Hebrew characters. There are some other things that point to Nero being the one alluded to here: in some early copies of Revelation, the

number written down is 616, not 666: but 616 can also equal out to Nero Caesar--in fact, it's even a little more straightforward. In fact, the idea of referring to Nero by the number 666 might have predated Revelation. (Bauckham, as cited by Keener, Revelation, p356, n.35).

The point in referring to Nero would be to bring to mind again all that imagery of the worst of the worst of the emperors, the model bad emperor. Nero stands in as the representative bad guy, and the representative idol, and he represents the whole religious system that the beast of the sea and the beast of the land are promoting: that we should worship emperors, living and dead, and Rome herself.

### ***Marks 2: vv16-18:***

The mark of the beast, which is a number and a name, is what we're stained with when we take part in the imperial cult, in worshipping emperors, Rome, whose true nature is seen most clearly in Nero, a Christian killer.

That John calls this number "a human number" is just one more slam: why would we take part in worshipping *a person* when *the God of all creation* is just waiting to seal us against judgment if we would only turn to the Lamb.

The mark of the beast, which is a number and a name, is what we're stained with when we take part in the imperial cult, in worshipping emperors, Rome, whose true nature is seen most clearly in Nero, a Christian killer.

The mark of the beast is worship. Revelation is a book of worship; and the sealed 144,000 of the Lamb--who we're a part of--they are the Lamb's worshippers. Worshippers are

sealed by the Lamb or marked by the Beast. John's asking: Who will you worship?

Here's the problem: You cannot take part in the life of the Roman Empire if you decide not to take part in the Imperial Cult. As one author says:

"...Imperial cults were not simply a game played by the elite to legitimize their dominance in society. Imperial cults were much more than that. Imperial cults were also bullfights, footraces, wrestling, public baths, concerts by male choruses, and festivals for the city's ancestral divine protector. Imperial cults were inscribed on public buildings, on altars, on statue bases, in gymnasia, in temples. They were proper expressions of reverence by 'the small and the great, the rich and the poor, the free and the slaves,' (Rev. 13:16. In short, the worship of the emperors was a crucial part of Asian Society in the first century..." (Friesen, *The Beast...*, in Barr, 59).

The mark of the beast is worship. Worshippers are sealed by the Lamb or marked by the Beast. John's asking: Who will you worship?

## ***Piling Up 2***

So: This beast from the Sea is Rome, whose power is demonic power, represented likely by the governor of Asia, the province John's churches were in. And the beast's power, the Roman Empire's power, is a parody, a poor mimicry of God's power as seen in Jesus. Jesus is triumphant; the beast is a farce...but those who take part in the worship of Rome, of its emperors and its patron Gods, they are giving to Rome what should be only given to God and the Lamb, the only

legitimate power in the universe.

And this beast from the land is the local, province-based system of Temples & Festivals & all the rest, which was in a thousand ways the Propaganda arm of Rome's claim to worship. And this beast's power was just as devilish as the sea beast's, as Rome's own.

If the seal of the Lamb is taking part in all the stuff the church does, in maintaining a faithful witness, the “mark of the beast” is the opposite: It’s taking part in all the stuff of Roman society, which is all tied to the Imperial cult, the worship of the emperors & Rome. The mark of the beast is not a thing we have, it's a thing we do. It's taking part in all the stuff of Roman Society that is tied to the Imperial Cult.

**Heavy:**

But imagine if every single normal thing you did connected you somehow to worshipping the devil, who was setting himself up as a mockery of Jesus. Everything you buy, online or in a brick-and-mortar shop, everything you read or watch, when you turn on your phone, play a game, watch sports, eat or drink: Everything you do is tied to Emperor worship. And John is saying to you: Do not take part. Do not take part. What then?

Do you leave Rome? And go where? And go how? The world wasn't mobile then; outside of a city you were setting yourself up for robbery and death. Do you stay in Rome? And do what? Compromise yourself every day? Every street you walked on had an emperor's name carved in it. Every marketplace had an altar. And if you wanted to be anyone, do anything, earn anything, buy anything, take care of your

family in anyway, you are taking part in a system that is the devil's system. A demonic system.

So what are you going to do? If you move to the left or the right to the front or the back, you're complicit in the worship of the enemy of the Lamb and your brothers and sisters, the sealed ones. You blaspheme God, and praise the power that killed Jesus.

So you go, I think, the only place we can go. To your knees. And you don't go there alone. You fall to the ground with others.

### ***John's Promises:***

Here's what John promises: if you choose to stand against Rome you will ultimately fall, you will be cut down, because there is no place for you in this empire; there is no place for you in this political religious economic system.

But there is a place for you in the Lord. There is a place for you around the throne; under the altar, a place for you we'll read about soon, where there is nothing but peace and light and power and vindication, and it is filled with others who have chosen to bow to the Lamb alone. And what seems like losing will be triumph, because Rome will be shaken out, and all the claims it is making will be seen for the lies they are.

### ***Practical Application?***

And I think that the reason John doesn't say "This is then how you must live." or "Here's what you do." or "These are all the work-arounds you need to function in society." is because the point is not "How can I pay my bills, then, John?" John's point is that Rome is the devil, all its power is

demonic power, and all its claims are being made by an enemy who was kicked out of the realm of God. Our priorities are simply not where his are. How to survive isn't his issue; rather, how to stay faithful is.

We are discussing where our ultimate loyalties and allegiances lay, how we must avoid participation in devilish things no matter what it costs us.

***A diffused enemy:***

But we, today, are in a pickle. We have all the vision's force, but none of its focus.

So we sit around here and we identify whatever enemy we can identify, or join with whatever crowd is pointing their fingers authoritatively at someone, because we need some sort of enemy.

How are we supposed to deal with the force of Revelation and its call not to be compromised, when we ourselves don't have a focus, a thing to point to that's easy to say "That's the enemy, resist in that area?" Everything is linked to everything else in this world of ours: I buy a phone that's made in China, where a guy gets 70c. an hour to build it, and its made from materials that come from a mine in Africa, where people spend their lives underground digging it out and children die of aids and hunger and COVID on the surface. And then I waste my time using my phone to stay "in the loop" on all sorts of things that have nothing to do with Jesus, many of which stand actively against him, while at the same time asking for loyalty from me.

There are hundred evil things in the world we share, many of

them too far removed from us, some closer we ought to consider, but none so consuming that they can carry the weight of concentrated resistance Rome could carry.

I envy those who find some place to concentrate their resistance, who decide this or that institution is just like Rome. I am continually tempted toward it. But I have a hard time honestly focusing all John's force in any one place, at any one institution or person or thing. There are days, when I am at my most pathetic and ungrateful, when I wish I lived under some despotic tyrant, just so I had a place to focus my resistance. I sometimes envy both those who do or those who have decided to live like they do. I get the urge; I can't even condemn it.

### ***Toward Conclusion:***

I am not in a place where loyalty and worship are being demanded of me in exchange for my continued way of being. There are Christians who read this chapter and can name the beast before them, because they are forced to choose to deny Christ, they live in places where state religion is mandated, and if you don't take part you will be punished. That is simply not our context, no matter the very real evil around us.

And so they are punished, or they live as secret subversives in their empire, or they are killed. But that is simply not our life, no matter how much we can pretend it is or pin "I'm a beast" buttons on people and systems around us...a thing we all do.

### ***Conclusion:***

Revelation 13 is the uninvited guest that we don't have time for, who keeps trying to visit, isn't wearing a mask, makes us uncomfortable. We ought to welcome this passage in, because it is a reminder that we cannot let down our guard against the evil that is loose in the world.

We must be aware of the loyalties we are giving away--to political parties, leaders, economic systems, institutions, ideas, things and people. We must watch our checkbooks and our calendars. Maybe our stomachs, too.

This is not a show we can turn off, a phone we can put down, or a book that we can stop reading. We are in the middle of it, right now: today we'll be asked to give our allegiance to something other than the Lord, offer something other than the Lord honor and praise that only God should receive. Not as completely as Rome demanded, but not negligibly either.

There is no great enemy for us, no one place to focus our resistance. So we must rely on the Spirit, Scripture, and each other to identify what's asking for our worship and allegiance.

I pray attentiveness for us, the power to examine ourselves and our lives, courage to reject what we must reject, and faith that the enemy will fail--it's guaranteed. And so is our triumph, if we can just resist the marking that comes when we give allegiance and worship to that which doesn't deserve it, if we can receive the seal that comes in light of worshipping our Lamb and God in the Spirit.

I hope, at least, we understand this passage a little more clearly.



## **Extras:**

### **Prayer:**

God: You have sealed us with a strong hand. We worship you and no lesser thing. Don't let us compromise ourselves, Lord, but instead mimic the dedication your Lamb showed when he brought us with him into your fold. Protect us from our shared enemy, who is sneaky and spiteful, and guard us with your power, and bless us as if we follow through on our every good intention. Make Smoky Row a blessing for those around us in need, and for the world beyond us. Bring your kingdom on earth like is in heaven.

### **On "Beast From the Sea: The Woman's Ride"**

I want to pile up some things for a moment, and I need us to try to hold them in our minds. First, let's jump ahead. In Revelation 17. In Revelation 17 we see more or less the same thing that we see in Revelation 13, today's passage. I'll read.

***"Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters...I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns..."***

***"Then the angel said to me: Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which was the seven heads and ten horns...the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits....they are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The Beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction."***

Rome was famously built on seven hills, and is a port town: This woman clearly represents the city of Rome, "sitting on seven hills by many waters." And this woman sits on the dragon, the devil. The power underlying Rome, as far as these visions are concerned is the devil, the accuser of God's people who has been cast out of heaven.

The seven heads of the beast from the sea are seven kings, we're told: five who have gone before, one who is, and one who'll show up soon. The Emperor "who is" is likely a reference to Domitian, the emperor at the time Revelation was written, but there's this eighth king, right, who was somehow supposed to be the last in John's Vision?

### **Again, Knock-off:**

See, Revelation 13 reveals that all Rome's demonic power is just a knock-off weak version of the Lamb's power. And Revelation 17 does the exact same thing. This Nero character parodies Jesus. This beast "once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss to go to its destruction." But Jesus is the one who is, who was, and

who is on his way, and will overcome destruction. The Lamb's power comes from God; Rome's emperors, Nero included, get their power from the devil, and all the devil can do is mimic the God he has only ever come from the devil, who knows what God's power is like because he's already lost to it. He can mimic it well.

We could read in Revelation 17, how this eighth king ultimately leads to his and Rome's own destruction. Evil implodes upon itself. During Domitian's reign, just about ten years before Revelation was written, a false Nero arose, and persuaded Rome's enemies, the Parthians to join him against Rome. It led nowhere, but it scared the heck out of the Empire. No one forgot it. John wouldn't have, either. (Keener, 338).

### ***On "Was Given Power" vv5-10:***

We won't really look at vv5-10 right now, but it basically highlights that this beast is out of bounds, man: blaspheming God, working against the Lamb's people. And we see more parody and mimicry, as the beast from the sea, Rome, tries to claim for itself worshippers from every tribe, people, language, and nation, throughout the whole world.

But we know that God is Lord of the Earth, and that the Lamb's worshippers are from among all these. And John also gives his readers an eyes-wide-open look at what keeping Christian faith will cost them. It'll cost them their lives.

### ***On Daniel's Influence & The Second Beast's Job:***

More than that, it sets up this image for people to worship, which is convenient, because John is basing so much of the imagery in this passage off the book of Daniel, which described a similar situation generations before.

### ***On The Mark:***

This is why some Christians love to joke about how basic societal stuff that you can't live without is a "mark of the beast"--credit cards, social security numbers, using the internet. We love to label whatever is critical to function in our society as the Mark of the Beast--because we recognize that there are things that if we gave up we could not buy or sell, function in society. We get the truth of this Mark, but apply it wrong: it's not a thing we have, it's a thing we do.

The "all people, rich and poor, young and old, slave and free," are the ones who are worshipping the devil as they take part in the Imperial Cult, which was central and integrated into every aspect of Roman life. One author asks, "If every other mark in Revelation is symbolic, should we take this one literally simply because that is the long-standing tradition of many prophecy teachers?" (Keener, Revelation, 358.) I think the answer is no; we should take this mark symbolically, as a sign that refers to those who worship Rome and its emperors, living and dead.

### ***On Today's Passage:***

Today's chapter is a chapter that we have to have, because without it, we would, I

think, give ourselves away to whoever is loudest and brightest and shiniest. We were made to worship, we people. It shows up over and over and over, in every culture and every place: we worship things, beings, ideas, stuff: we love to worship, we love to give our loyalty and our allegiance away. It's just what we do. But there are some things we are not supposed to give away, there are things we are not supposed to say "yes" to, and we need prodded to think about them.