

# The Two Beasts

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Revelation 13:1-18 (Matthew 7:15-23, Galatians 5:22-23)

Back in 2016, a man entered a Washington D.C. pizza place, firing his semi-automatic rifle. Along with many other people, he had believed that the pizza place was a cover for a child sex ring. But, the source of that information was not true. And, although the information was fake, the results were real. Police charged the man for assault with a dangerous weapon. Thankfully, no one was hurt or killed! We live in a time where it is sometimes difficult to know who to believe in our conversations, or what to believe when we read something. If we follow Jesus Christ, known as the Lamb of God in the book of Revelation, we have an absolute source of truth. It is by the standard of Jesus that all things are measured.

Chapter 12 of Revelation tells the story of Satan, symbolized as a dragon, trying to devour Jesus at his birth, but Satan fails. In heaven, everyone celebrates Jesus. Because of his sacrifice on the cross, he now has the victory over Satan. Satan and his followers are banished from heaven and cast down to earth. Now, Satan fights all those who would follow God on earth.

This afternoon, we read chapter 13. In this chapter, Satan, as the dragon, empowers two different beasts to deceive the world. The result is that many people worship the dragon and the first beast. The dragon and the two beasts represent a trinity of evil, (the fake news) that opposes the holy trinity (the good news) of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Let's take a look at some of the symbols in today's chapter.

The first beast rises out of the sea. Some people believe that this beast represents a person, who is the antichrist. While it is true that "antichrist" means someone who works against Jesus Christ, this first beast from the sea likely represents more than just one person. In his letters, John, writes that there are many different antichrists. I'm reading from 1<sup>st</sup> John chapter two, verse 18, "...As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come..." The sea beast could easily have represented the Roman Empire, which would have access to Israel by sea. In fact, the meaning here would likely have included Rome, but also gone beyond just Rome, to include all those political leaders who work against Christ and persecute Christians. The seven heads of the beast connect it with the seven heads of the evil dragon, and the 10 horns represent great power. It's interesting that the crowns are on the horns, rather than on the heads. This could mean that the ruling power of the beast is in the form of "brute force," represented by the horns, rather than in logical thinking, represented by the heads. The blasphemous names on the heads would represent slander of God through lying words and actions. It could symbolize the fact that Roman emperors were often called gods. They even had divine titles engraved with their images, on coins... The animal images come from the book of Daniel. Here, they represent powerful empires that had brought death and destruction to the Israelites.

I should note here that just as the source of the beast's power was from Satan, Jesus Christ's power came from God. Also, just as the beast had a mortal wound and yet recovered, Jesus Christ had a mortal wound in his execution on a cross, and he recovered. These parallels show us how the beast represents a counterfeit Christ. A big difference, though, is that the beast only lasts for a short time, 42 months. Earlier, in Revelation we see this same number. Sometimes it's stated as 3 ½ years, but the point is that it represents a limited time. Judgement would soon come on the beast, and it would be no more. Jesus rose to life after dying on the cross, and he remains Lord for all time.

Because of the amazing power of the dragon and the beast, people are amazed, and worship them, "saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'" The basis of worship is the fighting power of the beast. The beast has authority over all the inhabitants of the earth, but not over those whose names are "in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

Jesus Christ conquered Satan through his sacrificial death on the cross. Today's passage says that the beast is given power to conquer all the inhabitants of the world, but followers of Christ have the final victory, beyond death. This part of the chapter ends with a warning. "Let anyone who had an ear

listen...” We’ve heard this before, at the beginning of Revelation where letters to seven churches encourage them to be faithful to Christ amidst persecution. Here, it is an encouragement to non-violent endurance, “if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed.” This is in stark contrast to the physical violence of the beast.

Following this, we read of a second beast, not from the sea, but this time rising up out of the earth. While the “water beast” represents political powers, this “earth beast” represents religious authority and satanic rule. Like the first beast, this beast also pretends to be like Christ. It has two horns, like a lamb. But, it acts the opposite to the ways of Christ, the Lamb of God. Like Christ, it performs amazing signs, but these seem to be more fearful, such as bringing fire from heaven, and having those who do not worship the beast to be killed. In contrast, Christ performed miracles to show the power of God’s love, healing and forgiveness. The beast speaks with deceit, and convinces people to make an image of the first beast and worship it. This breaks one of God’s commandments that says we are to not make any idols or images to worship. We are to worship only him.

Finally, we come to the “mark of the beast” the “666.” One possible meaning for this is that it could be a code name for a particularly cruel Roman emperor named Nero Caesar. He even murdered his mother. With Hebrew and Greek characters, there is a list of corresponding numbers. When you add up the numbers of the Hebrew letters for Nero Caesar, they total 666. Another meaning for 666 could be that it represents humanity falling short of the divine “7.” The number seven is considered complete and is often connected with God. Here, the 666 could represent the fact that the evil trinity of the dragon, and two beasts fall far short of being equal to the divine trinity of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The deception of the dragon and the beasts is symbolic of what happens in our world today.

The dragon and the beasts represent false prophets. It’s mass deception, on a cosmic scale. Knowing that there is much deception in our world, how do we figure out what is true and what isn’t? We need to continually return to Jesus Christ. In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father (God), except through me.” Jesus taught the truth, and he lived it. In Matthew chapter seven, he gives some ideas about how we may figure out true and false prophets.

Starting in verse 15, ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.’

Galatians chapter five, starting in verses 22, lists the fruits of the Spirit. If we see in the words and actions of another person these fruits, we can rest assured that they reflect the truth of Jesus Christ. “...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...” Where do we see these things in our world?

I’ve seen and heard, and read the messages of different preachers, online, and I notice that I agree with much that they say. But, there are also often comments with which I do not agree. I also notice that when I look at the lives of some of the preachers, they do not seem to reflect the life of Jesus. I can’t imagine Jesus flying around in private jets and regularly staying in luxury hotels. The video “American Gospel” is an excellent documentary that explains how many Christian leaders have ended up distorting the truth of the good news of Jesus Christ.

In order to not be deceived, we need to be careful to check all the information we receive. Are we getting our information from the source? Eye-witnesses are the most reliable sources. That’s why the writings of Jesus’ disciples are the best source for us to learn about the story of Jesus. We also have multiple sources of the same information. Some parts of the Bible are based on hundreds of copies of ancient manuscripts. If we hear something from a friend who heard something from someone, who heard something from someone, and so on, what if the original information was incorrect? We need to

check, and test our assumptions. When we read something, we need to think, “Why was this written? Is it trying to convince me of something? Is the person who wrote it someone who had a good reputation?” It’s interesting that the stories of Jesus have the disciples often being pretty clueless, and even looking stupid! If the disciples were making up their stories, they would have more likely described themselves in a positive light. Instead, their openness to describe their lack of understanding added to the legitimacy of their writings.

The beast desired people’s worship. When we hear or read some information, does the person, or writer seem more interested in gaining popularity than in telling the truth? Does the person seem interested in personal gain? Many people seem to be more interested in money than in having good relationships. Does the speaker’s personal life reflect what they say? If the person is a preacher, does he or she lead people closer to God, or does the teaching draw people away from God? We need to ask these questions to ourselves when we listen.

Before the time of Jesus, the word heresy was not a negative word. The original Greek word meant, “to choose.” Heresy meant a person’s own understanding of things. But, in Jesus, we see the absolute truth. He is the way, the truth, and the life, that comes from God. Now, heresy means people choosing what they wish to believe rather than accepting God’s absolute truth as shown in Jesus.

All Christians and preachers are sometimes heretical. No one is perfect. We all make mistakes. I’m suspicious of preachers who say everything so strongly that there seems to be no room for questioning, and that irritates me especially if they strongly say something with which I totally disagree. Of course, I’m sure I’m sometimes wrong in what I may say, but I trust that I am not usually totally wrong. And, I have faith that God leads those who hear my words to a right understanding, even though I’m imperfect. I believe all Christians should have the attitude of being disciples, meaning every one of us has more to learn. Even stuff that we think we already know will sometimes need to be changed as we learn and grow. That’s why our standard needs to be in Jesus, and not in a great person, or even in a favourite preacher. Relying on multiple sources will help us make more reliable choices in the information we trust and share. There is plenty of deception in our world. May we keep our eyes on Christ and the way of the Lamb. I’d like to end with a passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 20, verse 15, “...Thus says the Lord to you: ‘Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God’s...’” Let’s pray.

O Lord, God, you are all-powerful and all-loving. Thank-you that you are in control, and that you continue to limit evil in our world. Sometimes it feels overwhelming that there is so much deception around us. Teach us to trust in you, and to follow more closely the way of your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank-you that we need not fear the powers of darkness when we seek to walk in the ways of Christ. May the fruits of your Spirit grow in us, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.