

"THE DRAGON'S ARM AND MIND"

I. Introduction

- A. 666. The number of the beast.
 - 1. This has inspired all sorts of fanciful notions, both among Christians and in the broader culture.
 - 2. It has been suggested that the number of the beast is a matter of tattoos, or computer chips, or barcodes, or birthmarks, or the numerical value of the letters in a certain person's name.
 - 3. All of these things make the same basic mistake: they think that the number of the beast is to be understood literally.
 - 4. But as we have been noting all throughout this sermon series, the numbers in Revelation are symbolic, not literal.
 - 5. As we will see later on in tonight's sermon, there is a relatively straightforward explanation of the symbolic meaning of 666 that makes good sense in the context of the book of Revelation.

- B. The two beasts in Revelation 13 represent the earthly powers that Satan uses to accomplish his purposes.
 - 1. The first beast is the instrument that the dragon uses to exert his power.
 - 2. It is, as it were, the dragon's arm.
 - 3. The second beast is the instrument that the dragon uses to spread his ideology.
 - 4. It functions as the dragon's mind.

5. Broadly speaking, both beasts can be seen as antichrist figures, though this designation is more directly applicable to the first beast.
 6. While it is true that these beasts are not called antichrists here, they are antichrist figures because they seek to usurp what rightly belongs to Christ.
- C. While the name “antichrist” only appears in John’s epistles, the idea is present in several other biblical books.
1. When we assemble all of the information that the Bible tells us about the antichrist, we come up with the following general picture.
 2. The antichrist opposes the true worship of God and demands worship of itself.
 3. It leads in the persecution of God’s people and seeks to advance Satan’s agenda through its power and its false teaching.
 4. The things said about antichrist in 1 John and 2 Thessalonians indicate that while there will be an individual antichrist figure at the end of history, there are also many forerunners of antichrist throughout history.
 5. In the words of theologian Anthony Hoekema, “though there is to be a climactic antichrist at the end of time, there can be precursors or anticipations of the antichrist before he appears.” [*The Bible and the Future*, 156]
 6. It is important for us to keep this in mind as we study Revelation 13 tonight.
 7. In this chapter, we are given an eye-opening picture of forces that are at work in the world today.
 8. This text is a lens that helps us understand the things that are happening around us.

II. The Beast from the Sea

- A. In the last part of chapter 12 we saw that the dragon, who is a symbolic depiction of Satan, was making war on the saints on earth after his defeat by Christ and his subsequent expulsion from the heavenly sphere.
1. Chapter 12 ended with John making this statement about the dragon: "And he stood on the sand of the sea."
 2. That sentence is the link that connects the vision in chapter 12 to the vision in chapter 13.
 3. It tells us that the beast that rises out of the sea is brought forth by Satan.
 4. In the Bible, the sea sometimes represents chaos and the forces of evil, the things in this world that threaten the welfare of the people of God.
 5. This is clearly the case here.
 6. In Isaiah 17 and Revelation 17 waters are associated with the nations that rage against God's people.
 7. This helps us to see that the first beast is symbolic of nations, governments, and social structures that inspire opposition to the church.
- B. Like the dragon, this beast has seven heads and ten horns.
1. Some interpreters argue that the seven heads are to be identified with particular Roman emperors.
 2. The problem with this is that the decision about which emperor to begin with in order to come up with the number seven is arbitrary.
 3. The numbers seven and ten are symbolic of completeness and fullness.

4. The basic point is that the beast takes different forms over the course of history, and that it is a force to be reckoned with.
- C. This is underscored by John's description of the beast in verse 2, which is a composite of the four beasts that Daniel sees in his vision in Daniel 7.
1. Those four beasts were symbolic of distinct kingdoms that persecuted God's people at successive points in biblical history: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome.
 2. At the same time, even in Daniel's vision they have a symbolic significance that transcends those kingdoms and represents all of the persecution that world powers level against the church.
 3. This explains why the four beasts of Daniel 7 are combined into one figure here in Revelation 13.
 4. For John and his first-century readers, this beast clearly represents Rome.
 5. Yet there is also a broader application throughout history.
 6. The beast from the sea is symbolic of the world powers that Satan employs to oppose Christ's church.
- D. John also says that the beast from the sea suffered what appeared to be a mortal wound on one of its heads, but the wound was healed and this resulted in the whole earth marveling as they followed the beast.
1. Some say that this refers to Nero's suicide and the ensuing rumors that he had not really died and would somehow return to the throne.
 2. The problem with this theory is that it is not plausible that John would put any stock in something that was clearly false.
 3. It could be that this refers to Nero's death in the sense that it left Rome without a clear emperor for about a year afterward.

4. It seems best to understand the beast's mortal wound by connecting it to the dragon from which it derives its power and authority.
 5. We are told in verse 14 that the beast's wound comes from a sword.
 6. In Revelation, Christ is frequently described as bearing a sword that he uses to strike down and slay his enemies.
 7. In his death and resurrection, he dealt a fatal blow to Satan.
 8. Nevertheless, Satan appears to recover from that blow in the sense that he is permitted to war against the church on earth during this present age.
 9. He carries out this warfare through the two beasts.
 10. The wound on one of the heads of the first beast points to the many downfalls that have been experienced by oppressive world powers that war against the church.
 11. Whenever that happens, as it did with the Roman empire, it appears that the beast is dead.
 12. But the beast eventually rises again in some other form.
- E. Another significant aspect of the beast's wound is that it is described in a manner that reminds us of Christ.
1. Remember that when John turned and looked at the Lion of the Tribe of Judah back in chapter 5, he said, "I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain."
 2. Christ was slain and raised, and the beast mimics this by appearing to do the same thing.
 3. The beast also resembles the Lamb in other ways.

4. Both have followers who receive a mark on their foreheads, both have horns, both have worldwide authority, and both receive worldwide worship.
 5. This resemblance also extends to the Trinity.
 6. The forces of evil are embodied in the figures of the dragon, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth (which, as we will see later in this sermon, is the same as the false prophet mentioned later in the book).
 7. Further, this unholy triumvirate is connected with the great prostitute of chapter 17, who stands as a parody of the church as Christ's bride.
 8. All of this is reflective of how the spirit of antichrist seeks to cause people to direct the devotion and worship that they owe to the one true God to itself.
 9. This is exactly what we see happening in this chapter.
 10. The people of the earth marvel at the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"
 11. Note how that statement resembles numerous Old Testament ascriptions of praise to God.
 12. For example, Psalm 86 says, "There is none like you among the gods, O Lord."
 13. Satan and his antichrist figures are counterfeits who try to set themselves up in God's place.
- F. Another notable feature of John's description of the first beast is his emphasis on the fact that the beast is given permission to do the things that he does.
1. He is given a mouth that utters haughty and blasphemous words.

2. He is allowed to exercise authority for a limited time, or forty-two months.
 3. Notice, by the way, the repetition of the period of forty-two months, which is three and a half years.
 4. This is the symbolic period that is ordained for the church to endure tribulation as it bears witness to Christ.
 5. As we have noted before, this is referring to the period in between Christ's first and second comings.
 6. One other thing that John says the first beast is allowed to do is make war on the saints and even to conquer them.
 7. While Satan inspires and empowers the beast to do its work, it is ultimately God who permits all of this to happen.
 8. This is what is being conveyed by the repeated phrase, "it was allowed" to do such and such.
- G. When John speaks of how the beast fights against the saints, he describes the latter as "those who dwell in heaven."
1. This is how Revelation distinguishes between the identity of true believers and that of unbelievers.
 2. Even though believers still live on the earth, our true and permanent dwelling place is in heaven.
 3. Unbelievers, however, are described as those who dwell on the earth, as we see in verse 8.
 4. And notice what this passage tells us about the determining factor when it comes to which group a person belongs to.
 5. Verse 8 says, "all who dwell on earth will worship [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation

of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.”

6. The book of life is a symbol for God’s eternal decree of election, in which he appointed some to everlasting life.
 7. Those whose names have been written in that book will not succumb to the pressure to give their allegiance to the beast.
 8. But the rest of humanity will worship the beast.
 9. There is no neutral position.
 10. People either worship and serve God or they worship and serve the forces of evil.
- H. The first half of the chapter ends with a statement that is derived from two passages in Jeremiah that described Judah’s captivity at the time of the Babylonian exile (Jer. 15:2; 43:11).
1. The point being made by this is that persecution is inevitable for the church in this present age.
 2. Though Christ has conquered Satan, Satan has been permitted to make war on the saints for a time.
 3. He is even allowed to conquer them in the earthly sphere, though he cannot harm them in the heavenly sphere.
 4. This is why the description of the first beast ends with these words: “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.”

III. The Beast from the Earth

- A. We turn now to a consideration of the second beast described in chapter 13, the beast that rises out of the earth.
1. One reason why the first beast rose out of the sea is because its direct referent in the first century was Rome, and when Roman

authorities came to Asia Minor they came over the sea.

2. The second beast rises out of the earth because it represents the local forces that promoted Rome and encouraged loyalty to it.
 3. Commentators have described this second beast as a sort of minister of propaganda for the first beast.
 4. This symbolizes false religions and philosophies.
 5. In John's day, the thing that this would have brought to mind was the imperial cult.
 6. There are a variety of other ways in which this beast has operated throughout history.
 7. We can see its work in the various corruptions of Christianity that encourage compromise with and assimilation into the idolatrous world.
 8. We can also see how institutions such as mass media, social media, popular culture, and the technology industry are often employed to promote worldly ideologies.
- B. As we noted earlier, the second beast is described later in Revelation as the false prophet (16:13 and 20:10).
1. Like the first beast, or the antichrist, the false prophet of Revelation is both a principle that is at work throughout history and a figure who appears in a final form at the end of history.
 2. Another distinguishing feature of the false prophet is that it performs great signs in order to persuade people to worship the beast.
 3. Notice once again that this is something that the false prophet "is allowed" to do, reminding us of God's ultimate control over the forces of evil.

4. One question that arises is whether we are meant to take this as a reference to actual miracles or to counterfeit ones.
 5. We certainly know that priests in the ancient world often faked miracles in order to impress people.
 6. This seems to be what Pharaoh's magicians did in hopes of discrediting Moses' miracles.
 7. In first century Asia Minor, pagan priests sometimes used ventriloquism and other tricks to make it appear that idolatrous images were alive.
 8. This may be what is being alluded to by the description of the false prophet giving breath to the image of the beast so that it might speak.
 9. The basic idea is that the false prophet works to persuade people that the beast is a force to be feared and obeyed.
 10. He also uses the threat of execution to pressure people into worshipping the beast, which brings to mind how the Romans pressured the early Christians to participate in the imperial cult.
- C. The final detail that is conveyed about the second beast, or the false prophet, is that he causes people to be marked on their forehead or hand with the name, or the number, of the beast.
1. Like the seal that was placed on the foreheads of the elect back in chapter 7, this is not a literal mark but a symbolic one.
 2. It is like a brand that is placed on cattle, or even on slaves in some parts of the ancient world.
 3. It signifies ownership and devotion.
 4. Those who have the mark of the beast on them belong to the world and to the dragon who controls it.

5. The fact that the mark is placed on their foreheads or hands signifies how the devil controls their thoughts and their actions.
 6. John also says that those who do not have this mark on them will not be allowed to buy and sell.
 7. In other words, refusal to conform to the world and its ways will have a negative economic impact upon Christians, especially at those times in history when the beast gains ascendancy over a particular culture.
- D. As for the symbolism of the number 666, notice that it is also called “the number of man.”
1. The reason why this is said is because man was made on the sixth day.
 2. When we consider this number in light of the numerical symbolism that is such a key feature of the book of Revelation, we see that the problem with the number six is that it falls short of seven.
 3. Seven is the number of fullness, completion, and perfection.
 4. Six, and especially a six that is repeated three times, is the number of futility.
 5. In the words of William Hendriksen, 666 is “failure upon failure upon failure.”
- E. Our chapter ends with this statement: “This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.”
1. This is not a command for people to employ all sorts of elaborate mathematical schemes to figure out the hidden identity of the figure behind the number 666.
 2. The point is simply that we need to be watchful for the subtle and crafty ways in which the forces of evil try to insinuate their ideas

into our hearts and minds.

3. The power that is wielded by the forces of antichrist creates an atmosphere of fear, pressuring people into bowing down to evil forces.
4. The deceptive strategies that are carried out by the false prophet cause people to think that the forces of antichrist are worthy of their devotion.
5. If we are going to remain faithful to Christ in such a world, we need to exercise discernment.
6. As the apostle Peter warned, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8 ESV)