

## UNDER PRESSURE

(Series: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ)

As we continue making our way through the last book of the Bible, we come to a text which is one of the easiest to understand. We do? Yes. The first readers of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Revelation of Jesus Christ – would have gotten the message right away. Or, it might be better to say, they would have FELT the message right away. Or, better yet, they would have gotten the message right away about why they were feeling under pressure – under pressure to compromise their loyalty to Jesus as the True Emperor and True God.

Remember, that is how Jesus portrays Himself in the opening Act of the five act drama that is The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Jesus intentionally crafted His seven messages to the seven churches of Asia to present himself as the True Emperor and True God. In Revelation 13, Jesus now helps His disciples in 96 AD, and His disciples in 2013 AD, understand the dynamics of the pressure they and we are under to compromise.

This text takes us into one of the fundamental practical issues every person faces every day: Who will we worship? We are the creature who worships. It is automatic: we all worship, to be human is to be a worshipper. It is not just a clever, throw-away line when the media speak of the “church of Oprah,” or the “Cathedral of Higher Education,” or the “Religion of Hockey”. We will witness one of the most powerful worship services on the planet when men elevated to godhood take the field in New Orleans for the Super Bowl this afternoon. Humans worship. The issue every day, and every moment of every day, is: Who will we worship?

Through Revelation 13, Jesus blows away the fog, and helps us understand why we are under pressure to worship anything other than the True Emperor and True God. And through the text, Jesus puts the Lord’s Supper in a whole new light.

And the dragon stood on the sand of the seashore.

Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns *were* ten diadems, and on his heads *were* blasphemous names.<sup>2</sup> And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like *those* of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority.<sup>3</sup> *I saw* one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed *and followed* after the beast;<sup>4</sup> they worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?”<sup>5</sup> There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him.<sup>6</sup> And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, *that is*, those who dwell in heaven.

<sup>7</sup> It was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> If anyone has an ear, let him hear. <sup>10</sup> If anyone *is destined* for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb and he spoke as a dragon. <sup>12</sup> He exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence. And he makes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose fatal wound was healed. <sup>13</sup> He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men. <sup>14</sup> And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life. <sup>15</sup> And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. <sup>16</sup> And he causes all, the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, <sup>17</sup> and *he provides* that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, *either* the name of the beast or the number of his name. <sup>18</sup> Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.

(Revelation 13)

This is one of the easiest texts of the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ to understand? Yes, and the first readers of the text would have gotten it relatively quickly. They would have seen and heard that they were under pressure to compromise their loyalty to Jesus from three forces at work in the world. They were under pressure from forces portrayed as a dragon, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the earth. They were under pressure from a kind of trinity – a counterfeit trinity – a dragon, a beast from the sea, and a beast from the earth.

So are we. We are under pressure, usually very subtle, but very real pressure from the dragon, the archenemy of Jesus, who hates Jesus. And, we are under pressure from the dragon's two agents in the world: dragon manipulated political power – the sea beast, and dragon manipulated religious power – the earth beast.

How do we know this? How do we know that this is the message of Revelation 13? In the chapter before this text, in Revelation 12, in the theological centre of the whole book, we meet a dragon, a child, and a woman. The woman gives birth to a male child, who, says John, is to rule the world. As the woman delivers the child, the dragon tries to kill the child, but the child is lifted up by God to His throne. The child is born and lifted up. His whole life, his whole career is collapsed to "born ... and lifted up." Because the ultimate purpose of the child being born into the world is to be installed on the throne of the universe as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The child is the True Emperor and True God.

And the dragon is furious. An understatement! Since he is thwarted in his attempt to kill the child, he goes after the woman. But she is taken to a safe place, and so in his rage, he goes after her “other offspring” as John puts it. He goes after the disciples of her child; he goes after the followers of Jesus. If the dragon cannot destroy Jesus, it will then seek to destroy those whom Jesus loves. But the dragon does not come at Jesus’ disciples directly – it would be much easier to stand if he did.

So, Revelation 13. The dragon does his work in the world through two agents. Two agents portrayed as beasts – one from the sea, the other from the earth. And the first readers of Revelation 13 quickly realized what the imagery and symbolism is portraying. The beast from the sea is political power manipulated by the dragon. The beast from the earth is religious power manipulated by the dragon.

Again, how do we know this? Not that all political powers are dragon manipulated. Not that all religious powers are dragon manipulated. It is just that in the quest for power, political powers become vulnerable to the dragon’s offer of power. In the quest for “relevance,” for “making a mark on the world,” religious powers become vulnerable to the dragon’s offer of power. The beast from the sea is Jesus’s portrayal of political powers under the influence of and empowered by Jesus’ enemy. The beast from the earth is Jesus’ portrayal of religious powers under the influence of and empowered by Jesus’ enemy.

And how do we know this? In the book of Job, we read about two great beasts: Leviathan, the sea monster (Job 41:1), and Behemoth, the earth monster (Job 40:15). We meet these two monsters throughout the Old Testament. They regularly represent evil forces seeking to undo and destroy God’s good creation. And they regularly represent evil empires oppressing God’s people.

In the book of Daniel, we read about a dream the prophet had in the first year of Belshazzar, King of Babylon (Daniel 7:1-14). Daniel sees four great beasts “coming up from the sea” (7:3) – the same language that John uses in verse 1 of Revelation 13. The first beast, says Daniel, was like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth he is unable to describe. As the dream unfolds, it becomes clear that the beasts represent four human kingdoms, each rejecting the claim of the Living God, each seeking to live independently of God.

John describes the beast from the sea using the imagery of Daniel. Revelation 13:2 – “like a leopard, and his feet were like those of a bear, and his mouth like that of a lion.” Leopard, lion, bear – the first three beasts Daniel saw. Is John saying the beast from the sea is the fourth beast which Daniel was unable to describe? Or, is John saying that the beast from the sea is all four wrapped up into one? That each of the four kingdoms Daniel saw was but a particular expression of the beast from the sea? That the beast from the sea manifested itself in each of the four, and by implication, in other kingdoms yet to come?

I think so. The beast from the sea is human kingdoms in any era that leave the living God out of the centre of their lives. In John’s day, the beast was manifested in Rome. Before Rome, it was Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. After Rome, in empire after empire.

And Revelation 13 tells us how the beast becomes beastly. Beasty-ness emerges out of blasphemy – out of misplaced worship. Political powers do not set out to be beastly. They set out to be their own master, and in the process turn beastly to retain their power. When political powers set out to be their own gods, they do not become divine, they become less than human, and sometimes even demonic. Need I illustrate?

John saw this happen in his day, he saw it happen to Rome. Rome did not set out to be beastly. It did not set out to be God, either, but it slowly moved in that direction. First creating gods in its own image, then worshipping its own image. Revelation 13:4 – worshipped. Verse 4 again – worshipped. Verse 8 – worshipped. Verse 15 – worship. John is telling us that powers no longer “under God” seek to play God, and slowly demand worship – absolute loyalty.

In 29 BC, the Emperor Augustus allowed a temple to be built in his honor in the city of Pergamum – of the seven cities to which the Revelation of Jesus Christ was first sent. By the end of Augustus’ reign in 14 AD, the worship of the Empire and Emperor was taking place in thirty-four other cities (Stott, 203). Augustus’ successor Tiberius continued the trend. So did his successor Caligula, who insisted he be acknowledged as divine. Claudius was more moderate; but still tolerated the blasphemy. From 54-68 AD, Nero took things further. But it was Domitian who in 96 AD took it to extremes. He had a gigantic temple built in his honour in the city of Ephesus – another city to which the Revelation of Jesus Christ was first sent. And Domitian demanded that the whole world treat him as god, insisting he be addressed as Dominus et Deus, “Lord and God”. You know: larger than life photograph of the “great leader” plastered on billboards, large military parades, soldiers bowing to “the Great One.” One of the circular letters from Domitian’s office began “Our Master and our God bids...” (Stott, 203).

And why did all this happen? The dragon. John wants followers of Jesus to realize that in Augustus’ and Tiberius’ and Nero’s and Domitian’s quest for absolute power, they fell prey to the dragon, and began to operate dragonishly. The state had become an agent of the enemy of Jesus.

Now, how does what John sees square with what the apostle Paul sees? That is, how does Revelation 13 square with Romans 13? In Romans 13, Paul calls political power on earth, “the servant of God”, and twice he calls governing authorities “ministers of God” (Romans 13:4). Is John contradicting Paul? No. Paul writes under the administration of Claudius, who played down emperor worship – allowed it, but played it down. John writes under the administration of Domitian, who demands worship. In just a few decades, the servant of God in Romans 13 moved out from its God-ordained role, and slowly became the servant of the dragon in Revelation 13. The pattern has been repeated again and again -- political powers manipulated by the dragon.

John sees one of the heads of the beast suffer a mortal wound and then be healed (verse 3). This is a clear act of counterfeit: the beast is trying to imitate Jesus. The same language used of Jesus earlier in the book is used of this head of the beast. Chapter 5 (verse 6): “I saw a Lamb standing, as if slain.” Chapter 13 (verse 3): I saw one of his (the beast’s) heads as if it had been slain.” Chapter 5 (verse 9): The Lamb purchases men and women “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Chapter 13 (verse 7): The beast seeks to exercise authority over men and women “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.” Chapter 5 (verse 13): the whole universe worships the Lamb. Chapter 13 (verse 4): the whole earth worships the dragon and the beast.

This mimicking of Jesus actually took place in John’s day. Nero committed suicide at the age of 32, and a rumour soon began that he did not actually die, but had to be taken to a remote island, where he recovered from the attempted suicide, and would one day return to the throne. He did die, and he did not return. But the rumour took on mythic proportions – think Elvis Presley, think JFK. Power hungry politicians exploited the myth: Nero-imposters emerged all over the Empire. The Emperor Otho is reported to have taken on the name Nero, even signing some of his official documents using the name!

But note. John does not say the head that was wounded came back to life, he says the beast came back to life (verse 12). “Head” is a way of saying “king.” The beast has seven heads; his kingdom has seven kings. Rome – seven hills? One king is killed, but the kingdom continues.

Which is why John records the people crying out (verse 4) “Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?” The beast is very resilient. Just when one form of his reign is overcome, another rears its head. “Who is able to wage war with him?” The implication being, since dragon-like kingdoms keep arising, since the beast keeps coming back from defeat, why not “just accept the inevitable” and compromise with his apparently absolute power?

And the beast of the earth? It too mimics, and uses its power to mimic to deceive people through signs and wonders. John says (verse 13) he mimics the sign worked through Moses (“great signs”), and he mimics the sign worked through Elijah (“makes fire come down from heaven”). And why does the earth-beast perform these signs? To induce people to worship the sea-beast. The role of the beast from the earth is to do whatever it takes to get people to trust in political power that has moved out from under God.

John says this beast has “two horns like a lamb” (verse 11), yet has the voice of a dragon. He mimics the Lamb’s horns. Horns are a symbol of strength. He “performs great signs”, says John (verse 13). The second beast makes an image of the first beast, suggesting that the beast is into image-making, into propaganda.

Now, note verse 15: the second beast “gives breath” to the first beast. The earth-beast provides the spirit, the life-force, for the sea-beast. And just as the Lamb marks his people, so this earth-beast marks his people. As the Lamb puts a seal on his followers, so the earth-beast puts a seal on his followers, and makes it difficult to do business – “to buy and sell” – unless people have his mark on their head and on their right hand. Not literally so. The imagery is simply telling us that this beast can so influence the marketplace that unless we opt into his spirit and ways we will be left out.

I think you can see then that the beast from the earth is religious power or powers. John is telling the churches of Asia Minor that like the state, religion can also be manipulated by the dragon. This is why later in the drama John calls the beast “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). Jesus warned the first band of disciples of just such a possibility. Beware of false prophets, He said, religious propagandists, “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Mark 13:22; Matthew 7:15), who induce people to worship power. Dragon manipulated religious power inducing people to worship dragon manipulated political power.

Which is what was happening in the cities to which John sent the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ. Some historians argue that it was religious authorities who were the strongest proponents of emperor worship! New Testament scholar George Caird goes so far as to say that “it would never have occurred to Augustus to claim divinity” if religious leaders had not raised the possibility!

We know that there was a group of religious leaders called “the Commune of Asia,” made up of representatives of the chief centres of Asia Minor who were originally charged with protecting their local god or gods. We meet such a group in the book of Acts (19:30) in the city of Ephesus. Over time they become, in effect, the priests of the emperor cult.

John says the earth-beast “deceives” people to worship the sea-beast. Members of the Commune of Asia actually used trickery to encourage such worship. They used hidden pulleys to cause statues to move. They used the tricks of ventriloquism to make the statues “talk.”

Is this why John says the beast from the earth has “two horns”? If he is mimicking the Lamb, ought he not have seven? Yes. But he is also mimicking the two witnesses of Revelation 11. The beast is mimicking the witness to Jesus, the Holy Spirit, who gives breath to the Kingdom of God.

John exposes the deceitful ways of the earth-beast. Verse 14: the beast has “come to life”. One of its heads is killed, but the beast has “come to life.” But note: John does not say the beast “was resurrected” – a critical difference! Resurrection is a whole lot more than “come back to life.” Lazarus came back to life; Jesus was resurrected. The beast can suffer defeat and bounce back in a new form, but the beast cannot resurrect itself with a life that never ends. This helps us understand what the 666 is all about, and we will come to that in a moment.

Under pressure. Under pressure to compromise. We are under pressure to compromise our loyalty to Jesus as True Emperor and True God. The pressure comes *through* both political and religious powers, but the pressure is not from these powers – they are just human. The pressure is *from* the dragon working through political and religious powers.

And is this not what Jesus was facing in His earthly ministry? If Revelation 12 is a Christmas text, Revelation 13 is a life of Jesus text. Jesus was under constant pressure to compromise His loyalty to His Father. And the pressure came *through* political and religious powers, but the pressure came *from* the enemy.

Early in Jesus’ ministry, He was in trouble because of the kinds of things He was saying and doing. He healed all kinds of diseases. He freed people from all kinds of spiritual oppression. He heals a paralytic, and says, “Your sins are forgiven.” He heals a man with a shriveled hand ... but on a Sabbath day. And we read in the Gospel according to Mark: “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” (Mark 3:6). I still remember how stunned I was the first time I read that. The Pharisees hated the Herodians; the Herodians despised the Pharisees... but they came together in a common hatred of Jesus. Religious powers joining political powers, unwittingly falling into the power of the one who hates Jesus even more.

Then, during Holy Week, we see all this taking place more publically. The religious powers and political powers coming together. Not because they like each other – they do not – but they both have to deal with “the Jesus problem.” Religion does not know what to do with Jesus. Politics does not know what to do with Jesus. The political powers actually are willing to let things work themselves out; Pilate finds no fault in Jesus and wants to let Him go. But the religious powers pressure the political powers; Caiaphas pressures Pilate. And they finally come together, manipulated by the dragon, to do what the dragon was not able to do when Jesus was born.

Jesus came under the intense pressure from the dragon through the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth. And so too, those who follow Him in this world – we come under the same pressure.

So, how do we stand under pressure? How do we “overcome,” to use the language of the last book of the Bible? In addition to what we have already learned, how does Revelation 13 help us overcome and stand? In three ways:

First, the text calls us to “wake up.” Verse 8: “He who has an ear, let him hear.” This is the same exhortation we hear seven times in Jesus’s seven messages to the seven churches – “They who have an ear, let them hear.” Wake up to what is going on in the world. Watch the news through Revelation 13 lenses. Read the news through Revelation 13 glasses. Wake up. We are not living in a neutral universe.

Second, the text calls us to “watch” – watch the movements of our hearts. In particular, listen to our fears and watch where we put our trust when we are afraid. During the recent election in the United States, I heard disciples of Jesus on both sides saying things like, “If he is elected, the country is finished.” Or, “he is the only hope for the future of the country.” Whoa. Religious people saying of political power, “he is the only hope...”? It sounds to me like what Caiaphas the priest said to Pilate the governor, on Good Friday. Pilate had asked “Shall I crucify your King?” and Caiaphas answered, “We have no King but Caesar” (John 19:15). What? “No King but Caesar”? Caiaphas .... what about Yahweh the King? Caiaphas, the religious leader had fallen into the trap of thinking Caesar the political leader had ultimate authority.

The only hope for Israel... for America ... for Canada ... or any other nation... is Jesus. Jesus works with political powers, and we ought to do all we can to raise up and elect political powers that “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). But such powers are not our hope. Jesus is our hope. So the text calls us to watch the movements of our hearts; listen to what our hearts say when we are afraid.

And third, the text calls us to worship – to worship the True Emperor and True God. We are going to worship, that is a given. We are going to surrender to some power. But which will it be? The power of the dragon, or the power of the Lamb?

So, 666. A lot has been written about this number! It is clearly a symbol. Many have tried to identify the symbol, as some specific historical person. In both the Greek and Hebrew languages, letters of the alphabet served as numbers. In English, A would be 1, B would be 2, C would be 3 ... and so forth. So people have tried to find names of historical figures whose letters-as-numbers add up to 666. Nero Caesar is said to come out 666, but only if you do a number of tricks with his name. It actually comes out 616, which should alert us to a problem in taking that tack!

I agree with those who say that we are supposed to treat 666 as a symbol of the nature of the earth-beast, of the nature of dragon manipulated through religious powers. Six is one less than seven. Seven is the number of perfection, six is therefore one less than perfection. John refers to the Holy Spirit as “the seven spirits of God,” a way to say that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus is perfect and complete.

Six. The nature of the beast is one less than perfection. Six six. Regularly one less than perfection. Six six six. Always one less than perfection. The best the beast can do is 6. The best religion can do is 6. The counterfeit trinity – dragon, sea-beast, earth-beast – want to be God, but never makes it. 6. 66. 666. Always, “one less, one less, one less”. As Saad Zarifeh put it in our evening Teaching Time on Revelation, “always losing, always losing, always losing.” Why worship that which never measures up?

Now, if we were to take the tact of letters of the alphabet representing numbers, and do the gematria with the name Jesus, in Greek *Iesous*, the name comes out 888! 666: never makes it, never makes it, never makes it. 888: always better than you expected, always better than you expected, always better than you expected. Worship the One who alone is worthy. No matter what the cost.

So we come to the Lord's Supper – a religious act, and a political act. An act that heals religion, and an act that heals politics. It heals religion by delivering us from religion! Religion saves no one; only a person can save – the Lamb who sheds His blood for the world. And it heals politics by delivering us from false hope. Political powers save no one. Only a person can save. The Lamb who, because He sheds His blood now sits on the throne above all thrones.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” In the midst of the pressure to compromise, the True Emperor and True God sets a table. “Do this,” He says, in remembrance of Me.”