

Series Revelation

This Message #20 Revelation 13: 1-10

Chapter 13 continues the topic of the persecution of believers which began in chapter 12. In this scenario we are focused on the history of spiritual warfare between the people of God and Satan.

Last week the text alluded to the temptation of Eve in the Garden in Eden and the curse pronounced on the serpent by God: "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" (*Genesis 3:15*). That was the beginning of the opposition between the sovereign Creator of the universe and His adversary, the fallen angel Satan, who is also identified in Scripture as "the dragon," "the serpent," "the deceiver," "the accuser of the saints," and lots of other uncomplimentary names.

The previous Scripture passage called our attention to the effort of Satan to prevent the incarnation of Jesus, and described the war in heaven when Satan and his angels were hurled to earth. Because of his various set-backs in his efforts to thwart the purposes of God, Satan became enraged and went off to make war against those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (*Revelation 12*).

Chapter 12 was given to the believers in the early Church, and also to us, so that we can have assurance about the future. There has been satanic opposition to the followers of Jesus Christ throughout this present age, but the end of the age will be characterized by extreme persecution and martyrdom. Believers will be blatantly targeted by the forces of evil. In spite of the increase in evil, believers can maintain confidence. Scripture teaches that their ultimate victory is certain because Satan is already a defeated enemy.

Unfortunately, even though he has lost the war, he has not yet capitulated to the inevitable. The vision of chapter 13 indicates that he will engage in one final convulsive time of warfare against the saints at the end of the age. Our reading will help us to understand the end-time strategy of Satan.

Read Revelation 13:1-10

These verses would have had a much more obvious meaning to first century readers than they do to us. They would have understood the symbolism of “the sea.” Jews who were well taught in the Old Testament Scriptures knew that “the sea” was often a metaphor for restless people who would be judged by God. First century readers would have immediately thought of Isaiah 17:12 “Oh, the raging of the many nations – they rage like the raging sea! Oh, the uproar of the peoples – they roar like the roaring of great waters!” Or perhaps Isaiah 57:20 “The wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud.”

John saw a hideous “beast coming out of the sea.” Imagine a horror movie. The beast slowly emerges one part at a time, so that at first only the horns emerge, then the seven heads, eventually the body, and finally the feet as the beast pulls itself onto dry land.

Once it was fully visible, John noted other features of the beast. It had the characteristics of a leopard, a bear, and a lion. The description of the beast would have reminded Jewish readers of the book of Daniel. Let me read some excerpts from Daniel’s writing: “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion ... And there before me was a second beast, which looked like a bear ... After that, I looked and there before me was another beast, one that looked like a leopard ...

“After that, in my vision at night, I looked and there before me was a fourth beast, terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth. It crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left. It was different from all the former beasts, and it had ten horns. While I was thinking about the horns, there before me was another horn, a little one, which came up among them; and three of the first horns were uprooted before it. This last horn had eyes like the eyes of a man and a mouth that spoke boastfully” (*Daniel 7:2-8 excerpts*).

In Daniel’s vision, the four beasts represented four world empires, the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires. These four empires represented the Gentile domination of the Jewish people in the Old Testament.

When Daniel sought to understand the true meaning of the fourth beast and the identity of the little horn which came up, he was given the following information: “The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it. The ten horns are ten kings who will come from this kingdom. After them another king will arise, different from the earlier ones. He will subdue three kings. He will speak against the Most High and oppress his saints and try to change the set times and the laws. The saints will be handed over to him for a time, times, and half a time” (*Daniel 7:23-25*).

The Revelation vision amplified the vision of Daniel. The proud and blasphemous words, the war against the saints, the exercise of authority for “a time, times, and half a time,” these were indications that Daniel and John were referring to the same creature.

In Daniel, the four beasts represented consecutive empires. However, Revelation presents a composite image of the previous beasts. All the ferocious and cruel characteristics of the empires of the Old Testament will be wrapped up in this unique creature who will come near the end of the age.

When we compare this beast of chapter 13 with the description of the dragon in chapter 12 (verse 3), we discover that they are almost identical. Both have ten horns and seven heads and bear crowns. These are symbols of political and military power. Scripture reveals to us that Satan has influenced the power-brokers and power-structures of earth. He is the force behind the greed, injustice, corruption, immorality, hatred, and fighting of people — the force behind the rebellion of people against God. John correctly stated in one of his letters, “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (*1 John 5:19*).

Notice that the dragon/Satan “gave the beast from the sea his power and his throne and great authority.” Satan’s power enabled the beast to accomplish miracles and perform mighty deeds in the eyes of the world. The throne (literally “dominion”) represented his position of dictatorial control. His authority was over “every tribe, people, language, and nation.” Satan raised up this creature and enabled him to serve as his agent on earth. The beast was part of Satan’s strategy in his efforts to make war against the people of God.

In actuality, the beast was a man, although symbolically he was a hideous beast. Daniel predicted that there would be one specific person who would be the leader of the world at the end of the age. That person would control the political, religious, and economic systems on earth.

The Apostle Paul referred to this same person as “the man of lawlessness.” According to Paul, this man “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.” Paul added that “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.” Paul assured his readers that “the Lord Jesus will overthrow this lawless one with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.” (*II Thessalonians 2:3-10 excerpts*).

In theological terms, the beast from the sea is usually named “the Antichrist.” This name does not appear in Revelation. However, the Apostle John wrote about such a person in his letters. “You have heard that the antichrist is coming. Even now many antichrists have come. Who is the antichrist? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist because he denies the Father and the Son” (*I John 2:18-22*).

In a later chapter, John wrote: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out in the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world” (*I John 4:1-3*).

From these instructions, it is clear that a major function of the Antichrist will be deceptive false teaching. The spirit of the antichrist has been an on-going threat to the Church since the first century. Jesus predicted that “false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that were possible” (*Matthew 24:24*). These false Christs and false teachers will be forerunners of the Antichrist who will appear at the end of the age. The Little Horn described by Daniel, the Man of Lawlessness in II Thessalonians, and the Beast/Antichrist of Revelation are all the same individual.

One of the great deceptions which will enhance the reputation of the beast is his recovery from a fatal wound. In verse 3 it states that “one of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound,” and in the second half of chapter 13 it states that it was the beast himself “who was wounded by a sword and yet lived.” The “whole world was astonished” by this “miracle.” They asked, “Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?” The beast seemed to be invincible. People also worshiped the dragon/Satan because he had empowered the beast.

I have mentioned a couple of times that Satan had a strategy. Let’s think about what Satan will be doing. Satan wants the beast to appear as the Savior of the world. He will make the beast to appear like Jesus. Both Jesus and the beast were supernaturally “incarnated” among the people of earth. Both were described as having horns of power (*see Revelation 5:6*). Both the beast and Jesus were slain (*the same word is used in 13:3 and 13:8*) and then raised to new life. Both were given power over every nation, tribe, people group, and tongue (*cf 5:9; 13:7*).

The beast in chapter 13 will appear to the world as its genuine Savior and Lord. He will attempt to obtain all the glory and majesty that rightfully belongs to Jesus. He will be presented as the counterpart to all that Jesus Christ represents. Just as Jesus was the Son of the heavenly Father, the Antichrist will come as the son of his father Satan. The truth is, the Antichrist is a thoroughly counterfeit deity. It is for these reasons that he is called “the Antichrist.” We will discover even more similarities when we study the last part of chapter 13.

Given the power and control that Satan and the beast will have over the earth, it might seem that there isn’t much encouragement in these verses for believers. The beast will blaspheme God, hold authority over the inhabitants of earth, and make war against the saints. This is indeed depressing information, but we, as believers, need to recognize the assurances which have been given to us in this passage.

First of all, we need to recognize that there are limitations which are placed on Satan and the beast. In verses 5 through 7 there are four passive verbs (in the Greek language) stating that the beast “was given” something: He was given “a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies; given the opportunity “to exercise his authority for only 42 months;” “given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them;” and given “authority over every tribe, people group, language, and nation.”

It is true, as stated in verses 2 and 4, that the dragon “gave the beast his power and his dominion and his great authority,” so the beast is clearly subordinate to the dragon (Satan).

However, those passive verbs also indicate limitations which are determined by God. He is the ultimate source of all power and authority, even over evil. The verb which is translated “was given” has already been used 13 times in this book of Revelation. When the seals were opened in chapter 6 various permissions were given to the four horsemen who rode out to conquer and kill (*Revelation 6:2, 4, 8*). Permission was given to four angels to harm the land and sea (*Revelation 7:2*). When it was time for the earth to be subjected to plagues, trumpets were given to seven angels (*Revelation 8:2*). Permission was given to a fallen star to open the Abyss and power was given to the creatures who came from the Abyss to torture non-believers (*Revelation 9:1, 3, 5*). Permission was given to the Gentiles to trample on the holy city (*Revelation 11:2*). We read about the woman who was given the two wings of an eagle so that she might flee to the place where she would be out of the reach of the serpent (*Revelation 12:14*).

The point here is that these verbs are considered “divine passives” because they demonstrate God’s control over all things, including the forces of evil. Neither Satan nor the Antichrist will be able to do anything without permission from God. And what are the activities in these verses in chapter 13 that God allows? He allows blasphemy (verse 5); a limited amount of time for evil activities (verse 5); power to conquer the saints (verse 7) (that’s surprising!); and worship of the beast and Satan (verses 7-8).

“But,” you say, “but I still don’t see any information here about assurance for believers. If I am to be conquered by the forces of the Antichrist, it will mean my death, correct? How is the prospect of my violent death assuring?”

Let me suggest some Biblical teaching we must keep in mind if and when we face serious Satanic opposition. First, God maintains both total spiritual control as well as total physical control. Satan can only operate in the physical realm. Satan can kill the body, but only God can determine both the earthly and the eternal destiny of people, and God has promised to protect and preserve for eternity those who have placed faith in Him. Concerning this point, Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (*Matthew 10:28*).

Secondly, believers need to understand the method God uses to gain spiritual victories. Jesus is our great example of this method. Jesus gained His victory over evil by dying. He voluntarily allowed Himself to be put to death, and it was through death that He overcame the power of sin.

Physical death is the ultimate threat in Satan's arsenal of weapons. Satan assumed that he had won a great victory when Jesus was crucified on the cross, but by yielding Himself to the worst indignity in Satan's arsenal, Jesus gained a great spiritual victory over Satan and evil.

God's method of spiritual warfare is a difficult concept for many believers to accept. It seems like an insurmountable paradox of Scripture that the saints of God may be put to death by Satanic forces, and yet for victory to be attributed to them and not Satan, but that is what the Bible teaches. Satan is defeated by the very act in which he assumes he is conquering.

In the early chapters of this book, Jesus summed up His instructions to the Churches by saying, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne" (*Revelation 3:21*). In chapter 12 we learned about believers who had "overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." How did they overcome? The verse concludes, "They did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (*Revelation 12:11*).

In verse 8 believers are given a strong word of assurance: their "names are written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb." God apparently has an official register of the citizens of heaven. The "book of life" was mentioned in chapter 3. Daniel mentioned such a book. He was told, "There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people, everyone whose name is found written in the book, will be delivered" (*Daniel 12:1*). The Apostle Paul described his fellow workers as those "whose name are in the book of life" (*Philippians 4:3*).

Now we come to the important application verses for believers. Whenever we read the words "He who has an ear, let him hear," we know something very important will follow. Jesus used that phrase many times in His teaching. It was used at the conclusion of each statement made by Jesus to the church fellowships in chapters 2 and 3. Here in verses 9 and 10 God is giving us important instructions regarding the conduct of believers when they face severe opposition and persecution.

There are two possible meanings in the couplets. Some commentators think that verse 10 refers to the Antichrist and his persecutors. They state that the interpretation is “If it is God’s will that anyone go into captivity, then into captivity he will go,” and “If anyone kills with the sword, then with the sword he must be killed.” These commentators summarize the meaning by saying that the verse applies to the enemies of God’s people — that they will be punished for their persecution of God’s people. The problem with this interpretation is that it doesn’t fit with the last sentence of verse 10, which calls for patience endurance and faithfulness on the part of believers.

The best interpretation applies verse 10 directly to believers. It speaks of the captivity and the killing of believers. It is instruction for believers who are being subjected to persecution, imprisonment, and the threat of martyrdom. The first couplet means that the believer must accept whatever God has ordained, and the second couplet warns against any attempt of the believer to defend himself or herself by the use of physical violence.

Many believers consider these to be shocking and illogical instructions. However, we need to keep in mind that the triumphs of God and the victories of believers are revealed through those saints who are faithful unto death. Jesus made clear to His disciples that they “would be handed over to be persecuted and put to death” ... but that “those who stand firm to the end will be saved” (*Matthew 24:9, 13*).

The Apostle Paul did not want his readers to “be frightened in any way by those who oppose.” He said that the lack of fear would be “a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved, and that by God” (*Philippians 1:28*).

Throughout this book, we have been informed that believers will face persecution and that many will die for their faith. This is not happening the U. S. A., but it does happen in many areas of our world. Captivity, suffering, and death have always been the lot of believers, and in the final days of this age, the pressures and hardships on them will increase significantly. Hence the last phrase of verse 10: Believers must exercise “patience endurance and faithfulness” in the midst of oppressive and dangerous spiritual situations.

When under persecution the proper response for believers is pacifism — non-violence. Pacifism is not submission to the beast, but to God. Believers must place their trust entirely on God, and passively accept their suffering and the possibility of martyrdom. It is God who has developed His battle plans against evil. We are not capable of making war against the beast and his helpers. In spiritual battles we can only be faithful in our testimony and faithful in our obedience, and leave the results to God. In doing this we will please God and be overcomers of evil.

As one commentator stated, “Believers must not preach the gospel of the love of God while using the violence of man.” Our instructions are to accept what God ordains and not try to defend ourselves by use of force.