

Series Revelation

This Message #21 Revelation 13:11-18

We are studying the section of Revelation which focuses on Satan's war against the people of God. Chapter 12 described the dragon, who is also known as the devil and Satan. In chapter 13 we learned about one of the helpers who will be raised up by Satan to assist him in his battle against the people of God. John described this helper as a hideous beast. That was the way the helper looked from heaven's perspective. In actuality, the beast will be an attractive and appealing type of individual who will be given power and authority by Satan to slander and blaspheme God and to fight against God's people. This beast/man is referred to as "the Antichrist."

Satan is limited in his methods. He is a spirit being, like the angels of God. He has to work through physical agents to accomplish his purposes. He gains control of the thoughts and behaviors of individuals through their fallen fleshly nature. Pride, selfishness, greed, and lusts are a few of the common attitudes he uses to turn people away from God and to carry out his evil deeds.

Satan sometimes establishes his presence in people through demons. Once demonized, it is difficult for a person to separate his own consciousness and thinking from the influence of the demon. The identity of the person becomes merged with the demon and therefore can be controlled by Satan.

Through the centuries, from very early Bible times, Satan has used false teachers and evil minded political leaders to create chaos among humanity. Just think of the pain and suffering which has been inflicted on the human race by the Stalins, Hitlers, Maos, and Pol Pots within the 20th Century. Think about the many many millions of deaths which have been caused by the political ambitions of rulers small and great throughout history.

Last week we thought about the Antichrist. He will be the last political leader before the end of the age. He will exercise authority over all the inhabitants of the earth. Satan will give this man incredible powers and great authority. The Antichrist will be the most wicked and cruel man of all time.

This week our attention is on another beast. This beast will be another agent through whom Satan will carry out his war against believers.

Read Revelation 13:11-18

This second beast is introduced to us simply as “another beast,” literally “another one of a similar kind.” In terms of appearance this second beast will look like a lamb. Outwardly he will seem to be gentle and harmless, but his voice will be like a dragon. This does not imply that the sound will be a loud roar or hiss. It is my guess that the voice will be as beguiling and deceitful as was the serpent’s voice in the Garden in Eden.

Viewed from heaven’s perspective, this creature is a beast, but in later chapters it is a man named “the false prophet” (*Revelation 16:13; 19:20*). This false prophet will represent religious power. He will possess all the authority of the first beast and he will use that authority to bring honor to the first beast who represents political and military power.

In verses 12 through 16 there is a long list of activities to be performed by the false prophet. He will make “the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast.” He will perform “great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men.” He will “deceive the inhabitants of the earth.” He will order that “an image be set up in honor of the first beast.” Then he will “give breath to the image so that it will be able to speak.” He will “cause all who refuse to worship the image to be killed.” He will force “everyone ... to receive a mark on the right hand or on the forehead.”

The false prophet will seek to impress the world by imitating the miracles and signs of others. For example, the prophet Elijah dramatically called down fire on the altar on Mount Carmel (*I Kings 18:36-39*). In the Gospel account which bears his name, the Apostle John highlighted several sign miracles which affirmed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. The false prophet will likewise validate his position by displaying his power and ability to perform supernatural signs.

Jesus predicted the appearance of “false Christs and false prophets who would perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect, if that were possible” (*Matthew 24:24*). The Apostle Paul wrote about the lawless one “whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders” (*II Thessalonians 2:9*).

The most impressive miracle will be the restoration of life to the Antichrist following the fatal wound suffered by him. Just as the resurrection of Jesus was the greatest proof of His relationship with the Father, the raising of the Antichrist from the dead by the dragon/Satan will convince the inhabitants of the earth that Satan is God, that he has divine power to create new life.

Later, the false prophet will give breath to an inanimate object so that it will be able to speak. The image will then give the command to kill everyone who refuses to worship it. As far as the world is concerned, the power of Satan as displayed by his two agents will be God-like.

And that is exactly what Satan will want the inhabitants of earth to think. Last week we noted some of the similarities between Jesus Christ and the Antichrist. Satan will want the Antichrist to appear as the Savior of the world. The Antichrist will be supernaturally incarnated among the people of earth just as Jesus was sent to earth by the Father. The Antichrist will receive authority from the dragon and be controlled by the dragon just as Jesus received authority from His heavenly Father and was guided by the Father during His time on earth.

The Antichrist will be slain and be restored to new life. Jesus said, "A time is coming ... when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:25-26). Satan and the Antichrist will latch onto that idea and, through the restoration of the Antichrist's life, will endeavor to convince the inhabitants of earth that they are Father and Son. These are among the imitations intended to deceive the people of earth.

The false prophet is also an vital member of Satan's team in another way. Just as the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and Son to be with believers, the false prophet will be sent by Satan and the Antichrist to be with the inhabitants of earth. Just as the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son (*John 16:14*), the false prophet will glorify the Antichrist. Jesus said, "The Holy Spirit will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears" (*John 16:13*). That describes exactly the work of the false prophet. His role will be to direct the attention of the inhabitants of earth to the Antichrist and Satan.

The Dragon, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet will make up an unholy trinity, patterned after and loosely resembling the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The goal of the evil trinity is to draw the attention and worship of all the people of earth away from the true God of heaven and, instead, to get them to focus their worship on the false Christ and Satan. The structure and function of the unholy trinity will be an important part of Satan's final strategy to deceive the population of the world and to spoil the plans and purposes of God.

Even the mark forced upon the inhabitants of earth seems to be an imitation of the mark which was put on the servants of God. Both kinds of marks designated ownership and loyalty. At the end of the age, every individual person will bear the mark ownership of either the true God or the false god Satan. They will have either the seal of the living God identifying them as servants of God (*Revelation 7:2-3*) or the mark of the beast/Antichrist. People will either have their names written in the Lamb's book of life (*Revelation 13:8*) or they will be categorized as followers of the beast/Antichrist. There will be no neutralities in Satan's war. All those who do not belong to Jesus are, by default, the property of the Antichrist and Satan.

The thought process of Satan is very strange. He does not seem to understand the extent of the wrath of God against evil. He does not anticipate the purification of the present earth and its replacement with a new heaven and new earth. He does not anticipate the removal of non-believers from earth and their everlasting punishment in hell. Rather, Satan assumes that the elimination of believers, that is, all those who make up the Church, the Body of Christ, will leave him in complete control of God's creation. This is why Satan is so determined to succeed in his war against "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus."

This is the reason behind the death sentence pronounced on all who refuse to worship the image of the Antichrist. It is the reason for the mark which will be placed on the right hand and forehead of non-believers. Without the mark, faithful believers will not be able to buy and sell. Discrimination will lead to either their starvation or single them out for death by violence.

Now a quick explanation of verse 18. This verse has probably been the subject of more speculation than any other verse in Scripture. Speculation about the identity of “666” began in the late 1st Century and there have been thousands of different possibilities suggested since then. John wanted his readers to exercise extreme care in interpreting the number. He called for “wisdom” and “insight,” both of which have been lacking in the fanciful opinions of untold numbers of commentators.

Many commentators have followed the ancient Greek system of numbering. There was no separate numbering system. Instead, letters from the alphabet were used to represent numbers. The letter “a” or “alpha” in Greek could represent the number one. “B” or “beta” the number two. “C” would be three, and so on. The first nine letters of the alphabet were the numbers one through nine, the next nine letters represented the tens through nineties, and so on. A series of letters could form a word or a number, depending on the context.

Many commentators through the centuries have looked for combinations of numbers used in Greek names which would total “666.” In the 2nd Century, letters in the title of the Roman emperor Nero totaled 666. Some believers thought he was the Antichrist because of his opposition to Christianity. In more recent times, Hitler and Stalin were identified as the Antichrist. (and, for what it is worth, also Henry Kissinger and Ronald Reagan and Osama bin Ladan.) Ingenious mathematical computations are not the same as the “wisdom” and “insight” that John said was necessary.

The only fact we know for sure is that the number of the beast “is a man’s number.” This we can understand since Satan will raise up a specific man to be his human agent to represent him on planet earth at the end of the age. John did not want his readers to think that the beast would be someone at the level of angels and demons. The beast will be only a human who will be indwelt by Satan. John wanted his readers to understand that the Antichrist would be completely under the sovereignty of God. It is likely that the 1st Century believers knew who John was referring to. Everyone since then has been guessing.

As we conclude we need to think about a very important topic. This topic is related to the sovereignty of God and the methods He uses to achieve His purposes. In the first part of chapter 13 there are several occurrences of the verb translated “was given.” These verbs are referred to as “divine passives,” meaning that God granted permission to Satan and the Antichrist to perform certain supernatural works. Two examples: the Antichrist was given “a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies” (*Revelation 13:5*) and was given permission “to make war against the saints and to conquer them” (*Revelation 13:7*). We thought about this last week. I emphasized that these “divine passives” demonstrate God’s ultimate control over all things, including the activities of Satan and his helpers.

There are two more “divine passives” in our passage today. In verse 14 we read that the ability of the false prophet to perform great and miraculous signs “was given” to him, and there was a specific purpose for the gift: so he could “deceive the inhabitants of the earth.” In verse 15, the false prophet “was given” “power to give breath to the image,” and the purpose is then explained: “so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.”

There is an important conclusion to be drawn from the use of these “divine passives:” Satan and his helpers do not have the ability to perform such incredible supernatural miracles on their own. The ability to call down fire from heaven and bring an inanimate object to life was possible only because God allowed such events to happen.

The question is why God operates this way. Why does God allow evildoers to have unique powers to deceive? And why, at the end of the age, will God be actually pushing unsaved people in the direction of Satan and his helpers? The answer is explained to us in Paul’s letter to the Church in the city of Rome.

In Romans chapter 1, Paul wrote about the wrath of God. His wrath “is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. ... Although such people knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their foolish thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.” “Therefore,” Paul wrote, “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts.”

And because humanity plunged deeper and deeper into sinful thinking and behavior, “God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They became filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity” (*Romans 1:18-29 excerpts*)

Let me summarize what Paul was saying: Because the inhabitants of earth rejected God’s ways, God let them live according to the ways of their own choosing. These were the ways of self-delusion and deception which they preferred. God allowed them to experience the consequences of their choices. According to this passage in Romans, God literally handed these very determined evildoers over to Satan.

In the earlier chapters of Revelation, God had sought to bring the people of earth to repentance and faith. In His final effort, God used the extreme measure of allowing the Abyss to be opened so that the people on earth could experience the horrors of evil. Two groups of demonic beings were unleashed on the earth. The first group was permitted to torture all earth dwellers except those individuals who had the seal of God on them. The second group of demonic beings were allowed to kill a third of mankind. This was described in chapter 9. Unfortunately, at the end of chapter 9, these are the words we read: “The rest of mankind that were not killed by the plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands. They did not stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood ...Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality, or their thefts” (*Revelation 9:20-21*).

By chapter 13, there will be no more opportunities for repentance. Because these earth dwellers so emphatically rejected God’s offer of salvation and refused to repent, God handed them over to the deceptions of Satan and his helpers. How ironic that people at the end of the age will continue to worship the same demonic forces which will torture and kill them. Such people are really hard-core, depraved evildoers. Because they are so tightly committed to Satan, such people will suffer the same consequences as Satan.

Last week I think I shocked you when I explained God’s method to gain spiritual victory. God’s people gain victory over sin and evil by being faithful unto death. They become overcomers by passively accepting their suffering and the possibility of martyrdom. Believers submit to God and trust Him for the outcome. The ultimate outcome of believers is not in doubt if they are sealed and their names are in the Lamb’s book of life.

We must recognize how blessed we are to be in God's family. We have the truth of God's Word in our hands and the Holy Spirit in our hearts. As the Apostle Paul wrote: "It is God who makes us stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come" (*II Corinthians 1:21-22*).

And what is coming for believers will be very very good!