

“The First Beast”

Revelation 13:1-10

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In chapter 13 we find ourselves still in an interlude between the sounding of the seventh trumpet and the pouring out of the first of the seven bowls. We have been introduced to the dragon, to Satan who makes war on the kingdom of God in this world. In chapter 13 we are introduced to two agents through whom Satan, the dragon of chapter 12, does his unholy work in the world. In the language and imagery of apocalyptic they are beasts, the first coming from the sea and the second rising out of the earth. We are considering the first of these beasts this morning. At the end of chapter 12 we saw the dragon standing on the shore of the sea. Now he summons his henchman from the depths. He had been unable to destroy the woman but now sends this beast, his servant, to make war on the woman's offspring.

- v.1 The idea of such a beast, as so much else in John's vision, comes from the book of Daniel, chapter 7. Daniel also saw great beasts rising out of the sea. In the mythology of the ancient world the sea was, as you know, an image of chaos and for the beast to arise from the sea identifies him as an agent of evil and destruction. We have already heard of a beast that comes up out of the abyss in 11:7. *Abyss* is another term for the great deep or the underworld under the power of the Evil One.

The seven heads make of this beast an ultimate enemy of the people of God and identify him with the dragon who likewise had seven heads (12:3). The fourth beast of Daniel also had ten horns. The ten horns, symbols of great power, will later be explained as ten kings (17:12) but they do not figure significantly in the vision of the beast. In any case, they do suggest that the beast is a figure of great power, perhaps most naturally political power, the sort of power ranged against the church in the Roman empire of John's day. The symbolic character of numbers such as seven and ten suggest that we are not to attempt to identify ten historical kings of the first century or any century

The blasphemous name (or names) seems to represent the beast's claim to divine prerogatives. We find this same idea in Daniel where one of the ten horns "speaks words against the Most High," in the Lord's Olivette Discourse, where we read of abomination that causes desolation standing in the Holy Place, and in 2 Thess. 2:4 where we read that the "man of lawlessness" will "oppose and exalt himself against everything that is called God or is worshipped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God."

All of John's readers would have seen the heads of Roman emperors with their names on the imperial coins. Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius and so on had been declared divine by the Roman senate upon their deaths and bore the title *divus* on coins even in their own lifetime. [Caird, 163]

- v.2 This beast combines, in other words, the attributes of Daniel's first three beasts. Daniel's fourth beast also had ten horns. Remember Daniel's beasts stood for successive world

empires. So this beast in Rev. 13 is a composite of Daniel's four and combines in himself all the characteristics of world empires and human governments, as the reference to his *throne* further confirms. [Caird, 162; Ladd, 178] In John's vision, Daniel's material is being reworked and reused.

- v.3 This enigmatic reference to the beast's death and resuscitation is often and plausibly linked to the history of the death of the emperor Nero, who took his own life in A.D. 68 in order to prevent himself from falling into the hands of his enemies. Upon his death there was widespread fear that the empire would come apart, actually disintegrate. There had been serious revolts against Nero's tyranny in the provinces toward the end of his reign. His death was followed by the chaotic "year of the four emperors" as different claimants for the throne jockeyed for position. But imperial power recovered after all. From the brink of collapse it was restored once again to seemingly invincible power. [Bauckham, *The Theology of Revelation*, 37] Taken this way, John's reference would confirm the identification of the beast with the government of the day.

More importantly the beast is a parody of Christ himself who died and rose again. He is substituting himself for the genuine article! [Cf. 5:6; Beale, 688-689] This too suggests that we ought to think of the beast not as simply one king or one government or one empire, but Satanic power as it is expressed repeatedly in the governmental structures of the world and as it will be expressed most terribly at the end of history. Time and time again it appears that the church and kingdom of God have advanced and the devil has been defeated. But he rises again in some other form and will continue to do so to the very end. [Beale, 691]

- v.4 Here is the key thought: men turned their loyalty away from God to worship instead Satan and the beast. What is underway is a contest for the souls and the worship of men. The beast will be worshipped because people will be so impressed with his *power*, not his moral greatness or goodness. It is precisely because governments, states wield such great power that they are so useful to Satan. It is the deification of government in which is found its most Satanic feature. [Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, 79-80] And, of course, in John's day, this is precisely what was happening: the emperor Domitian was demanding that he be worshipped as Lord and God.
- v.5 Once again the 42 months or three and a half years, the limited time of evil's reign.
- v.6 Remember in 12:10 Satan was described as the accuser of the brethren. The all-out war the beast will make upon the church will involve his defaming God, Christians, and their faith.
- v.7 The beast "was given" power... "was given" authority. Four times in vv. 5-7 we read that the beast "was given" something, indicating his subordinate role. He has no authority of his own. What evil he does, even his attacks upon the church can take place only because God himself allows it. He operates within limits that God has imposed on him. So the 42 months. Take note: the sweeping vista of John's vision of the persecution of the church far transcends anything that had happened in John's own lifetime. The vision is taking all

of history into itself, and perhaps especially the climactic conclusion of history in the last great tribulation through which the church must pass before the return of Christ.

- v.8 Once again we are given the assurance that God will safe-guard his people from lasting harm, no matter the ferocity of the attack made upon them.

There is a debate as to whether the statement should be read to mean that the names were written in the book before the foundation of the world (what we read in 17:8) or that the lamb was slain before the foundation of the world. The syntax favors the translation of the NIV rather than that of the ESV but both are possible. If we read it as the NIV does, the statement that the lamb was slain “from the creation of the world” indicates both that Christ’s death was God’s plan for the salvation of his people from the very beginning and that its saving effect has been available from the very beginning, from the fall forward.

- v.9 The “now hear this” of v. 9 [Mounts, 256], a phrase we have already read at the end of each of the seven letters in chapters 2 and 3, serves to emphasize what comes next.
- v.10 The text of v. 10, a paraphrase of Jeremiah 15:2, is possible to render in different ways and, in fact, reads differently in different Greek manuscripts; a sure sign that early scribes struggled to understand it. It seems to me that it is best understood, as it is in the NIV and according to the sense of Jeremiah 15:2, as an emphatic assertion of the inevitable and inescapable persecution of the church. *We will suffer: that* is what requires the patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

I suppose that some of you, familiar with the way in which Revelation is understood and preached in different circles of evangelical Christianity, have thought that there would be more *scenarios* in these sermons through the book, accounts of unfolding events in history. This thirteenth chapter is taken by many preterists, mostly post-millennialists, to describe in some detail particular historical events of first century history. Indeed, in their view the emperor Nero *is* the beast of Revelation 13.

Dispensational interpreters, on the other hand, take the chapter to describe events that will unfold only at the end of the age. This is a prophesy of things to come. The beast has not yet appeared. We wonder who or what he might be. The ten horns, you may recall, were in the days of my youth often taken to represent the governments of a reconstituted Roman empire to be formed sometime in the future and there was great excitement in these circles when the European Union, then called the Common Market, came to have ten nations in its membership. Now, of course, it has many more than ten and one hears less about the ten horns!

I have no doubt that John’s readers thought immediately of the Roman empire in John’s description of the beast from the sea in chapter 13, but I am also persuaded by a number of considerations that this beast is not only the Roman empire of the later first century but all human government as it serves the purposes of the Devil and as it arrays itself against the kingdom of God. Whether the 42 months, which seem in Revelation to refer to the entire period between Christ’s ascension and his coming again, or the statement in v. 8 that all the inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast, the indications are that imperial Rome was an embodiment of

this beast but hardly exhausted the metaphor. Whenever and wherever governments exceed their proper bounds, when they arrogate to themselves divine prerogatives, and when they move against the interests of the kingdom of God, they are the beast of Revelation 13. [Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, 73] It is the imitation of God that is the state's blasphemy and it is its aspiration to deity that provokes its fury against the Christian church. So we read in v. 4 that the state's worshippers cry out, "Who is like the beast?" The very thing they ought to be asking of God!

Now, there is certainly a more positive view of the state and human government in the New Testament. We Christians are commanded to be obedient citizens, to honor the state as an agency of God's rule in the world. John would not have disagreed with any of that. The state is a necessary institution; God appointed it for the welfare of mankind. But Paul, who had much to say about the proper role of the state, would have agreed with John that when the state arrogates to itself the prerogatives of God, it has gone too far and Christians cannot countenance or participate in the idolatry. And because they will not participate, they will suffer at the hands of the state; they will and they have again and again throughout history.

The Roman state certainly made Christians suffer. The first terrible persecution of Christians was by Nero after the great fire that laid waste to Rome, a fire most of his contemporaries and virtually all subsequent historians believed Nero had set himself. He sought to divert suspicion from himself by blaming the Christians, a new sect of growing popularity in the capital. Some were crucified, some sewn into the skins of wild animals and torn to pieces by savage dogs, and some were burned at night for torches. From that time onward in many places in the empire Christians were blamed and punished for being the cause of various calamities. [Kik, *Church and State*, 30] Domitian at the end of the century was putting Christians to death for refusing to honor him as "Lord and God." And remember the letter that Pliny, the governor of Bithynia sent to the emperor Trajan, a few years after the writing of Revelation. In that letter he made perfectly clear what Christians were being required to do: offer a sacrifice before an image of Caesar, confess in public that Caesar is Lord, and actually to curse the name of Jesus Christ. It had become a very stark "either-or." Worship either the state or Jesus, and Christians died in numbers when they refused to worship the state. Christians had been loyal citizens, but they weren't going to worship the emperor as a god and they certainly weren't going to deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They were faithful unto death and it was the state that put them to death.

So there is nothing in John's description of the beast that doesn't describe events in the first and second centuries. But there is nothing in that description that has not also happened times without number since and is not happening today. If the roll of Christian martyrs began to be formed in the first century, it has been enlarged in every century since.

If it was the state, the Roman and the Jewish state that executed Jesus Christ, that put Paul and Peter to death, that made many martyrs out of ordinary Christians over the several following centuries, it would also be the state, even so-called Christian states, that would persecute the believing people of God again in the years following the Reformation. The governments of France, of England, of Italy, of Spain all did this bloody work with a ready will. The last full scale persecution and martyrdom of Christians in the Western world was that of the Covenanters in Scotland, who were hunted down, imprisoned, or put to death by their government. Today all

over the world Christians live in fear of their government's active hostility or the indifference of their governments to systematic persecution of Christians by other religious and ethnic groups. What communist governments did and still do, Muslim governments do as well.

John's point is that with Satan's hand on the wheel as it were, governments are always going to be unwilling to curb themselves. The state will always aspire to a place that only God should occupy, it will always arrogate to itself a position in the lives of human beings beyond what is right, and it will always demand greater loyalty than ought to be given to it. In doing so, the state will provoke an inevitable clash with Christians and the kingdom of God. That is what Satan wishes to bring to pass. So it has been throughout history. So it will continue to the end. Domitian demanded to be worshipped as a god. The Stuart kings demanded to be recognized the head of Christ's church. The effect was the same for Christians. And it is the same today when a Muslim government requires a Christian convert to renounce his faith and reconvert to Islam.

What is at stake in all of these cases is what Nietzsche referred to as the "will to power." It is not, of course, a motivation restricted to government or politics. The recently hired CEO of Yahoo, publicly validated her hiring by telling the press that once in charge she intended "to kick some butt." We are supposed to admire this. Christians have found that they can face opposition and suffer persecution in companies where the accumulation of power and the exercise of power are the corporate goals and passions. But what is true in business is still more dangerously true in government because of the power that the state wields.

American Christians have had a uniquely difficult time relating to John's view of the state here in Revelation 13. We have for a long time thought of our government as a type or form of government that is not subject to the same temptations as more authoritarian forms of statecraft. Is not democracy supposed to liberate us from tyranny? Surely "we the people" would not do to Christians what emperors and kings have often done. Further we thought of our government as a friend of the Christian faith. American Christians for generations thought of the government of the United States as almost an organ of the kingdom of God. To think such, of course, was always a mistake. The government of the United States was never a willing servant of the kingdom of God. But whatever Christians may have thought years ago, no serious Christian any longer thinks such benign and happy thoughts about our government. Apparently "we the people" can do as much damage and can be as determined to insist on conformity to its policies as any king or emperor did.

As the years have passed it has been forced upon us that our democratic government is just as capable of active opposition to the kingdom of God and even brutal suppression of Christian conviction as any totalitarian state. It has not yet come to that, but the signs are everywhere. Our government has restored the practices of ancient Roman culture and insisted upon their protection: abortion and euthanasia being just two among many. Our government has arrogated to itself the right to destroy innocent human life. What is this but a pretension to the Divine? It acts as if it were God! What will Christians think twenty years from now, or fifty, about the government of the United States? I suspect that they will have a view of their government more like the view first century Christians had of theirs!

To personalize John's vivid but visionary and imaginative picture of the beast and his assault on the kingdom of God, and to bring home John's admonition based upon it – "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints." – I want to tell you a true story. I thought of this story for two reasons. *In the first place*, there is a new movie out, *Valkyrie*, about the attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler near the end of the Second World War. The film rightly celebrates that act of resistance to the Nazi government on the part of some military officers, some of whom were devout Christians. But if you as Christians know *that* story, you should know *this* one and know it better. It is more heroic in every way. *Second*, there is a link between this story and what I myself have experienced, as you will see.

Paul Schneider fought bravely in the German army in World War I. So bravely he was awarded the Iron Cross. He was severely wounded during the war but recovered and returned to battle. Schneider's father was a pastor in the Evangelische Reformierte Kirche, the German Presbyterian church. After the war, Schneider entered seminary to prepare for the ministry. It was a time of intense spiritual struggle for him. His professors were undermining his confidence in the Bible, communism and socialism were appealing alternatives to Christianity, but just before Christmas of 1921 his doubts were put to rest and he settled into the firm convictions of historic Reformed Christianity. But Paul Schneider was no ordinary young seminarian. Wanting to understand the conditions faced by the working man he spent most of a year as part of a gang of workers at a blast furnace near Dortmund. During the period of his theological studies he also worked at the Berlin City Mission, becoming acquainted with the people who occupied the lowest rungs of society and who struggled with various addictions. During his student days he married a beautiful young woman named Gretel. I have a picture of them on the occasion of their engagement and they make a very handsome couple. Theirs might have been a very happy life.

In 1926 he became the pastor of the church his father had pastored until his death. He immediately established a reputation as a faithful, conscientious pastor, a visitor of the sick and dying, an evangelist, and a powerful preacher of the Word of God. A story is told from those days of an epileptic boy whose seizures were so severe they could not be controlled by drugs. He died in Schneider's arms just after saying to his assembled family, "I thank you all for everything, but that I can die at peace with my God and with no fear of the grave, I thank our pastor."

In January of 1933 Hitler came to power and things began to change rapidly in Germany. Of the thousand people in Schneider's Rhineland parish, half of them voted for the Nazis. From the beginning Schneider saw what others could or would not. He preached openly against the ideology of the new government, refused to use the greeting "Heil Hitler," considering it a form of idolatry, and continued his work in ministry to the Jews. When he was not supported in his stand by the elders of the church, he was forced to find another pastorate, this with two churches: one in Dickenschied and the other in nearby Wornrath. He was installed in his new charge in May of 1934.

Just a month after he entered upon his new work, on a sunny Tuesday, June 12th in rural Rhineland, he travelled to a nearby town to stand in for another minister at the funeral of a young man who had been the first in his town to join the Hitler Youth. Schneider conducted the graveside service in the normal fashion but as he was concluding and without his permission the

local Nazi leader strode to the grave, spoke at some length, and finished by saying “Comrade Karl Moog, you have now been enlisted in Horst Wessel’s battalion in heaven.” Horst Wessel, as you may know, was a young Nazi thug who had been murdered in 1930. He was memorialized by the Nazis as a martyr of their movement and a song, the words of which he had written, became the unofficial anthem of the Nazi party.

In any case, Pastor Schneider was unwilling to have a Christian service corrupted in that way and as he stepped forward to pronounce the benediction he explained the gospel and assured the assembly that there was no Horst Wessel battalion in heaven. The day after Schneider was arrested for the first time.

I mentioned that I have had some experience of something like this. I have no objection to the military honors that are conducted at the gravesides of veterans. They are entirely appropriate. We had such honors at my father’s graveside service. But sometimes the honors include remarks and they are often entirely inappropriate for the burial service of a Christian. I have had some old veteran – it is often VFW groups that man these contingents – say that the fellow was in heaven because he had been in the war or had served his country and I have myself had to contradict his remarks after he made them. I wasn’t arrested for doing so, but it was certainly uncomfortable and unfortunate. Let me simply say, as an aside, if you arrange for military honors at Mt. Tahoma National Cemetery or some other cemetery, be sure that they do not include remarks! If they are what they sometimes are, your minister, if he is worth his salt, will have to contradict them publicly. Serving in the army or fighting in a war does not get anyone to heaven!

More arrests would follow. He was threatened and arrested many times. He was now a father of six children and the safety of his family was a constant worry. He was pressured to disassociate himself from the Confessing church, the group of Christians that resisted Nazism in the name of the Christian faith. He refused. Even Albert Einstein admitted that it was only the church that “had the courage to stand for intellectual truth and moral freedom.” He and his wife refused to vote in the plebiscite arranged by the Nazis to justify their remilitarization of the Rhineland – the ballot had a place for checking “yes” but no place for checking “no” – and his refusal to vote was announced by local Nazis in red paint on the door of the parsonage. Arrested again he was ordered to leave the Rhineland. He refused. He had committed no crime. He hadn’t even been charged. There had been no trial. When he returned to preach in his own church, Sunday, October 5, 1937, he was arrested again and eventually sent to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp. The official reason the Nazis always gave for suspending the rights of Germany’s citizens was “to defend the state.”

On the 28th of April, 1938 Hitler’s 49th birthday was celebrated at Buchenwald. The prisoners were lined up and ordered to venerate the Nazi flag. Schneider was the only prisoner who refused to do so. He was whipped 25 times and then placed in solitary confinement for the next fifteen months: in a cell four feet wide and ten feet long, with neither furniture nor an electric light, fed a diet of bread and water, and deprived of his Bible. After his return to the population, continuing to preach to the prisoners, often through the bars of his cell, and to protest their inhumane treatment, Schneider was whipped and beaten on other occasions. Of Paul Schneider one man who survived later wrote, “In my estimation he was the only man in Germany who, overcoming all human fear, so consciously took on himself the cross of Christ even to death.”

Finally, on July 18, 1939, a month and half before the outbreak of the Second World War, Schneider was executed by lethal injection. He was 41; his wife made a widow at 35; his six children now to face the war without their father.

When the Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who would himself eventually be executed by the German state, received the news of Paul Schneider's death he happened to be in London visiting his sister and her family. He said to his nieces and nephews, "Listen, children. You must never forget the name of Pastor Paul Schneider. He is our first martyr." [All the above from Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, 47-62]

What is there about that history that John has not already explained to us in his 13th chapter? To defend a state with Satanic and idolatrous delusions of grandeur Paul Schneider, a faithful Christian who did nothing but his duty as the pastor of Christian churches, was harassed, arrested, imprisoned, and executed; his family was made bereft of his presence and his love. Revelation doesn't teach us to oppose a state simply because it persecutes Christians. It gives us instead a prophetic critique of the vaunted pretensions of human governments acting at the behest of their unseen ruler, Satan himself. Those governments will come against Christians precisely because Christians cannot, will not accept the idolatrous pretensions of those governments. Their loyalty to Jesus Christ will not allow them to do so.

As we sit here in peace and comfort, it is our solemn duty to say to the Lord that, if and when the time comes, we will not flinch and that we will be faithful as so many brothers and sisters have been faithful before us, no matter the pressure brought against us. No matter the captivity; no matter the sword. Our names are in the book of life; no government can erase them; no government can offer us any inducement that will tempt us to be unfaithful to the King of Kings who was slain for us. In your hearts and with all your hearts tell the Lord, "I will be faithful, even unto death!"