

The Book of Revelation

Lesson 11: The Two Beasts -- Revelation 13:1-18

Stand for a moment on the shore where chapter 13 opens. The great red dragon, defeated in heaven and hurled down in chapter 12, is pacing the sand of the sea, and out of the churning water a monster rises. It has ten horns and seven heads, the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, the mouth of a lion. If you have read Daniel 7, you feel a shiver of recognition, for there four separate beasts marched across the stage of history, and now they are fused into one. This is not a new villain. This is every cruel, idolatrous, God-defying empire that has ever swaggered across the earth, gathered into a single terrible shape and standing in front of a first-century church that knows exactly whose face it wears: Rome, and the emperor who demanded to be called lord and god.

Look closely and you will see that the beast is a counterfeit. One of its heads has a mortal wound that has been healed, a grotesque parody of the slain and risen Lamb. The dragon gives the beast his throne and his authority, a dark mirror of the Father handing all things to the Son. The whole earth marvels and worships, crying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" That is worship language, stolen from the God of Israel, hijacked and aimed at a political machine. The beast cannot create; it can only mimic. And here is the sober comfort John writes into the scene: the beast is allowed to make war for forty-two months, no longer. Its leash is held by the One on the throne.

Then a second beast climbs up, this one out of the earth. It looks gentle, with two horns like a lamb, but when it opens its mouth it speaks like the dragon. This is the propaganda machine, the false prophet, religion bent into the service of the state. It does signs and wonders, it builds an image, it makes the image seem to breathe and speak, and it pressures everyone, small and great, rich and poor, to receive a mark on the hand or the forehead. No mark, no buying, no selling, no place at the table of ordinary life. The squeeze is economic and social, the quiet, daily pressure to just go along, to burn the pinch of incense, to keep your job and feed your family by bowing to the lie.

And then the famous number, 666, which has launched a thousand sensational books and frightened a thousand sincere Christians. Slow down here. John is not handing us a code to crack on tomorrow's news; he says it takes wisdom, and wisdom in Revelation always means seeing through the symbol to the truth. Seven is the number of God, of completeness, of the divine fullness. Six falls short. Six, tripled, is humanity playing God and failing again and again and again, a counterfeit trinity that can only ever come up one short of the throne. This lesson asks you to look at the beast soberly, to refuse both the temptation to ignore it and the temptation to sensationalize it, and to hear the line that beats at the center of the chapter like a steady drum: "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints."

Group Discussion: Where do you see the pattern of the two beasts at work today, a political or cultural power demanding ultimate loyalty and a propaganda machine making that demand feel normal, even good, and what does faithful, costly non-conformity look like for a Christian living inside that pressure?

Personal Reflection: Think of one place in your own life where the daily pressure to “just go along” tempts you to compromise your loyalty to Christ for the sake of comfort, income, or acceptance. What would it cost you to refuse the mark there, and are you willing to pay it?

Read Revelation 13:1–18

Study Questions

1. John sees a beast rising “out of the sea” with seven heads and ten horns, drawing the very imagery of Daniel 7, and the dragon gives it “his power and his throne and great authority” (13:1–2). Who is behind this beast, and what does the chapter teach about the nature of beastly, idolatrous, persecuting world-power, both in its first-century reference to imperial Rome and as a recurring pattern through history?
2. The whole earth marvels at the beast and worships it, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” (13:4). Where do you feel the pull to marvel at raw power, wealth, or political might as if it were ultimate, and how does worshipping the slain Lamb instead reorder what impresses you?
3. One of the beast’s heads had “a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed” (13:3), and the whole beast is described in terms that parody the Lamb who was slain and lives. In what ways is the beast a deliberate counterfeit of Christ, and why does Satan work by imitation rather than by open originality?

4. The beast is given authority “to make war on the saints and to conquer them” but only “for forty-two months” (13:5–7). How does knowing that the beast operates on a fixed, God-limited leash, not on a literal calendar but on a bounded period under God’s control, change the way you face seasons of pressure and apparent defeat?
5. A second beast rises “out of the earth” with “two horns like a lamb,” yet it “spoke like a dragon” and exists to make the earth worship the first beast (13:11–12). What is the work of this second beast, the false prophet, and how does idolatrous religious propaganda serve persecuting political power?
6. The second beast “performs great signs” and deceives, even making an image that seems to speak (13:13–15). Where are you most susceptible to being deceived by impressive religious or cultural performance that points you away from Christ, and how do you cultivate the discernment to tell the counterfeit from the true?
7. The beast “causes all” to be marked on the right hand or forehead, “so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark” (13:16–17), while elsewhere God’s people are sealed on their foreheads (7:3; 14:1). What does the mark symbolize, and what is the meaning of the economic and social squeeze it represents?

8. The chapter twice pauses to say, “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints” (13:10), warning that some go into captivity and some are slain by the sword. What does costly, faithful non-conformity look like for you this week, in the ordinary places where it would be easier to just go along?

9. The chapter closes, “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” (13:18). How should we soberly understand the beast and 666 as a symbol of man-centered incompleteness and counterfeit, against the sensationalism that ties them to modern political figures, technologies, microchips, or barcodes, and against all date-setting?

10. Looking back across the whole chapter, with its two beasts, its parody of Christ, its mark, and its repeated call to endurance, name one specific way Jesus is using this passage to form you into a more discerning, more faithful, less easily intimidated disciple.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Daniel 7:1–7, 19–27, four beastly empires and the saints who endure until the Ancient of Days judges; Matthew 24:23–27, false christs and false prophets performing signs, and Jesus’ warning not to be deceived; 2 Thessalonians 2:3–10, the lawless one whose coming is by Satan’s power with false signs and wonders; 1 John 4:1–6, testing the spirits because many false prophets have gone out; Revelation 14:9–12, the warning against the beast’s mark set beside the endurance of the saints who keep the faith.