

Finding Mercy

When my kids were young I would read to them, quite a lot. It was a special time that I treasured and they seemed to enjoy as we read and reread the Chronicles of Narnia, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, the Hobbit and others. I found that I didn't look forward to the final book of C.S. Lewis' Narnia series, even though it ends beautifully. There was just too much sadness that led up to that beautiful ending. The Narnians were deceived, then enslaved by those who had deceived them, and then, sadly, the lovely land of Narnia, where so many stories of heroism and displays of Aslan's love and care had taken place, was destroyed. There was no routing of the enemy, restoring the rightful king, leading the Narnians back to the way things should have been. Instead, the stars, who were real people in Narnia too, fell from the sky and the door was closed and the world where all the stories had taken place was no more. I remember hating the deception, hating the fact that an ape was able to use a donkey dressed up in a lion's skin to bend the whole population to his will. And that's a bit how I feel when I'm studying these middle chapters of the book of Revelation.

Today we will look at beasts that come out of the sea and out of the earth, see how they operate in our day, and then we will be ready for the final chapters when the seven bowls are poured out, the door is closed and the good stuff happens at the end. But first, let's look at where we've come from and fill in a few gaps with pictures of grace that are there for us to discover in the text of Revelation.

The apocalypse opens with a vision of Jesus and Jesus has something to say to the seven churches of Asia Minor. His message is different to each one, but the overriding message is, "Be strong, endure suffering, overcome the evil one, stay faithful to the testimony of Jesus -- don't deny Me, but witness to the truth in a world that doesn't want to hear the truth."

And then, John sees a door opened into heaven.

What we've seen, since the beginning of chapter four, is something much different than what the first-century follower of Jesus was seeing. What they saw was a world in which the Roman Emperor was supreme. He was called "Lord and god" by the crowds that gathered to see him. He was greeted by the shout, "Worthy!" from the senators of Rome when he entered the great hall. To any objective observer, he had all the power and was getting all the glory and he was also killing many Christians.

But John saw something no one else had seen and his vision was stunningly different. He saw a throne and one sitting on the throne. He saw four living creatures that represented all the living creatures God had made. He saw 24 thrones around the great throne and 24 elders seated on them and all these beings along with millions of angels were constantly giving praise to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb, who had been killed, and was now standing in the center of the throne, the place of all authority and power. The message: Caesar is not the great power of the universe: God is. And an associated message from that vision: Caesar is not worthy to open the seals on the scroll of revelation - only Jesus is.

After the Lamb had broken the fifth seal, John heard the cries of the martyrs: "How long, O Lord, before You judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us?" The answer was, "Wait a little longer," but then the judgments come, ushered in by seven angels with seven trumpets. We see a group that escapes judgment at this time and another that doesn't. Those who are subject to judgment are part of a group that is described by the phrase, "the people who belong to this world." They are people who love the world, who love the world's values, who have convinced themselves that they can live independent of God and can do what they want, when they want and to whom or with whom they want. And God says, "The time has come to put an end to this." But today I want us to look at how He does this, because even in judgment we will probably be surprised by the grace that God shows.

We'll start by going back to chapter 11, the vision of the two witnesses. They were hated by the world because they spoke the truth. They are killed by a beast that comes out of the bottomless pit and we are told that the people of the world celebrate the death of the two prophets who had tormented them. Now, how were the people of the world being tormented? God's witnesses were telling them that they were evil -- not a popular announcement -- and that Jesus had died for their sin. Because they were proud and because they loved the values of the world, they rejected this testimony and hated being confronted for their actions. So they celebrated the death of the witnesses by giving presents to each other. This, as we saw last week, is a picture of the church in this time between Christ's first and second comings. We witness to the world of what we have come to know about Jesus; those who most love the world are angry and reject our testimony. They rejoice when it looks like we have been defeated, and they are shocked when the church comes to life again and when our testimony is vindicated by God. That's what John is writing about in these verses.

But after 3 1/2 days, the spirit of life entered the witnesses and they came back to life and then were called up to heaven. Now, verse 13:

And in the same hour there was a terrible earthquake that destroyed a tenth of the city. Seven thousand people died in that earthquake. And everyone who did not die was terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. (11:13)

Now, this is unexpected in a number of ways.

In the first place, the prophets of old had spoken of a much greater devastation. Isaiah is called to prophesy in chapter 6 of Isaiah and his first message is a strong word of judgment on Israel. His response is to ask, "For how long, O Lord?" And the answer comes:

*Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant
Until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged,
Until the LORD has sent everyone far away
And the land is utterly forsaken. (6:11,12)*

And then, in the next verse, the LORD says that only one tenth will remain in the land. Judgment falls on nine-tenths and only one tenth remain. In Revelation 11, only one

tenth falls and nine-tenths remain.

Amos also prophesied against Israel, with these words:

This is what the Sovereign Yahweh says:

“The city that marches out a thousand strong for Israel will have only a hundred left.

The town that marches out a hundred strong will have only ten left.” (5:3)

Again, Amos sees nine-tenths falling and one-tenth surviving, while the Revelation sees one-tenth falling and nine-tenths being spared.

The seven thousand who die in the earthquake also likely represent a tenth of the people in the city. All of which points to the effectiveness of those who are witnesses. By telling the people about Jesus and even through their deaths, those who witness to the truth about Jesus have a huge effect on the lives of the majority.

The second surprising thing in this passage is that the people who had refused to repent in the earlier passages we looked at, the people who cried out for mountains and rocks to fall on them, rather than to see the face of God, are now giving glory to the God of heaven. Is this salvation? It's worth noting that every time people give glory to God elsewhere in Revelation, it is those who have believed, those who are saved, who will honor God in this way. One striking example is from chapter 14:

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth -- to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship Him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.” (14:6,7)

Fear God, give Him glory and worship Him -- these are the ways to prepare for the coming judgment.

A final note on the witnesses of chapter 11. In Darrell Johnson's book, Discipleship on the Edge, he writes this:

The nature of the witness has to do with what we wear. The witness that wins the world is clothed in sackcloth. Not literally so. As I said earlier, sackcloth is the sign of a prophet . . . And sackcloth is a sign of repentance. We carry out the prophetic witness clothed in repentance because the truth always calls for repentance. (p. 210)

He goes on to say that the witnesses wearing sackcloth indicates that they didn't come in a judgmental spirit, a spirit that shakes its fist at the world and calls everyone an evil sinner. Sackcloth indicates a humble and repentant spirit, a broken spirit, that witnesses to the world out of the brokenness of our own sin. This is very practical counsel for the church in our day, where we can get caught up in the judgmental spirit of our age and respond in kind. To have an effective witness, we need to be in the world as those who are aware of our flaws and failings and who will not take on the role of the judge, not place ourselves above others, but walk with them in humility and grace.

So, what's different about this scene, this vision, from the ones of earlier plagues and judgments? This, finally, is the one in which people repent and begin to give glory to the God of heaven. It follows on the heels of humble and broken witness, it comes after the miracle of a revived and restored church, and after a small foretaste of the judgment that is yet to come, the final judgment.

Chapter 13 describes two beasts and, as you might expect, they are not good news. One comes out of the sea, the realm of chaos in the ancient world, and the other comes out of the earth. Both are in league with the dragon, who is Satan, and both are enemies of believers. The first utters proud words and blasphemies -- so he speaks against God, puts himself in the place of God -- and he makes war against the saints. He has authority over every tribe, people, language and nation and the result is that everyone who does not belong to Jesus will worship this beast. The second beast comes alongside and encourages people to worship the beast from the sea. He orders an image of the first beast to be set up and worshiped, on penalty of death, and he forces every-one to receive a mark on their right hand or forehead which allows them to buy and sell. Then we're told that the number of the second beast is man's number: 666.

If you'd like an analogy at this point, think of the Dragon as Darth Sidious who masquerades as Emperor Palpatine, the beast from the sea as Darth Vader and the beast from the earth as Darth Maul or one of the other dark lords. This trinity of evil are deceivers and so they mimic the working of the true God. The description of the dragon in chapter 12 is an imitation of God -- the seven heads with seven crowns are symbols of authority and the ten horns represent great power. The description of the beast from the sea mimics the description of Jesus, the Lamb who was slain but is now alive. This beast had a fatal wound that had been healed, and becomes an object of worship. The beast from the earth mimics the work of the Holy Spirit, exercising the authority of the beast from the sea, causing the people of earth to worship that first beast, performing great miracles that swayed people to follow the first beast. He even was given the power to breathe life into an image, a statue, of the beast from the sea -- and breath is a clear representation of the Spirit. Some say imitation is flattery, but in this case it is better seen as defiance, as an act of rebellion, saying, "I will take the place of God!"

To simplify: the dragon is the great pretender to the throne of God. He is powerful, but he is not good or just or loving. The beast from the sea, the first beast, represents political power, the state that operates independently from God, the state that sees itself as the ultimate authority. The second beast, operates in the religious realm, using signs and wonders in order to get people to worship the state, the first beast. The issue is allegiance - who is your ultimate authority? Who do you worship? The emperor of Rome demanded worship from all its citizens and from all its territories, and the emperor of Rome in turn served power, the dragon and his beasts. But John's revelation says that ultimate power and authority belongs to God alone and he is warning the church to be on the lookout for the deception that lies beneath both the political powers and the religious influences that serve those institutions. The beast from the sea represents the false Christ. The beast from the earth represents the

false prophets.

Now, here's the historical piece that confirms this interpretation: in the late years of the first century, in Asia Minor where the seven churches were located that this revelation is addressed to, the local religious authorities were the strongest advocates of emperor worship! Rome did not need to invent emperor worship in order to impose its will on the cities, but the cities themselves fell over one another, competing for the privilege of building temples and statues that honored the Caesars as gods.

If we go back to the seven letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, what was the common enemy that they had to be aware of? Well, in many of the churches, it was the spirit of compromise, the willingness to accommodate their beliefs to the spirit of the age, the will of emperors, the politics of local authorities and, especially, the influence of false teachers, false prophets, people who represented something other than the teaching of Jesus.

This is the influence of the beast out of the earth, the spirit of false religion that may be given power to perform great signs, but is obviously not the spirit of Jesus, not the spirit of the servant King. So, if you've read ahead to the end of the chapter, or if you've seen any Christian movies about the last days, you'll really be wanting to know about the mark of the beast and the number of beast, 666.

Remember that these beasts falsely imitate the persons of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When we get to the next chapter, we read these words:

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads. (14:1)

What does that mean. Will we all have Jesus-Yahweh tattoos on our foreheads? No, in the ancient near east, the name stood for something. It wasn't just a label, but it represented the character of the person who was named. Jacob was named Jacob because he was a deceiver, someone who tried to gain the advantage over other people. God eventually changed his name to Israel which means, "he who wrestles with God." His identity was changed from someone who tried to trick others, to gain an advantage over people, to someone whose dealings were with God.

The earth-beast of chapter 13 mimics the sealing of the believers by putting his mark on them -- his character.

People who have the mark of the beast are people who hate Jesus. The strategy of the dragon and the beasts may be to perform miracles and lead the world astray and promote the worship of the emperor, or just the state, but the motivation for that strategy is that they hate Jesus; they hate the Father and want His power and glory and praise.

Which leads us to the number of the beast from the earth. Notice that the text says, in 13:18, "If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's

number. His number is 666.” There’s no article in the text; he doesn’t say “it is a man’s number.” And what does this number represent? The number six stands for incomplete-ness. The rabbis thought of the number six as the number of incompleteness. They would argue that creation was not complete until God had His day of rest. Seven is a number of perfection and completion and six represents all that falls short of that perfection and completion. The fact that it is repeated three times - 6, 6, 6 - three is also a number of completeness - means that the beast is completely incomplete. He cannot get there and the person who tries to earn his or her own salvation cannot get there. This counterfeit trinity - the dragon, the sea beast and the earth beast - wants to be God. But his number tells us that he will never ever get there. His is the number that always falls short, that can never reach its goals, that fails to take the throne away from the Creator and Lord of the universe.

There are other ways of interpreting the three sixes. One of them is called gematria and it has been shown, through numerous examples and attempts, to be inadequate. It was used by many scholars to link the earth beast with the emperor Nero, but it’s not tight enough to be satisfying. A third is called the triangular approach which was popular in the ancient world. I won’t get into it, but using this method points to the beast himself and, the Greek word for beast, *therion*, comes out 666. The bottom line is that the structures of political power and the religious structures that serve human interests are not able to help you and I to enter God’s presence, to know Him, to love Him or to honour Him with our lives.

When Jesus stood trial for blasphemy, He was faced by Pilate, who personified the beast from the sea, political power, and was accused by Caiaphas, the high priest, who personified the beast from the earth, religious power. Pilate turned to the religious leaders and said, “Behold your king!” and they replied, “We have no king but Caesar!”

They had long departed from serving Yahweh as God and king and had taken the mark of the beast on their fore-heads as accusers of the Lamb of God. That has been, and will continue to be, an enduring temptation that the church faces.

This book challenges us to examine where our highest allegiance lies. Is it to the power of government? Is it to some religious institution? Or is it to Jesus Christ? The first-century believers heard the cries of “worthy” and knew they were being offered up to Caesar. John brought them a vision of the truly worthy one, a Lamb looking as if it had been killed, standing in the center of the throne of absolute power and authority in heaven, being worshiped by every living creature in the cosmos.

Where does your allegiance lie today? Are you fully committed to glorify God with your life, no matter what the trends in public opinion might be, no matter what tragic circumstances you face, no matter what political and social, educational and governmental pressures mount against you? Revelation is a call to worship. It says that we can’t love the world and love God. We can’t honor Him with a divided heart. It tells us that Jesus, who gave His life to pay for our sin, is the only one worthy of our allegiance, and it calls us to remain faithful to the worthy one. Stay strong. Don’t be deceived. Worship Jesus.