

## The abysmal beast \* Revelation 13:1-10

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Every day, around the world, there are Christians who face opposition for standing firm in their faith.

I read this week of three Ethiopian girls - Eden, 15, Gifti, 14, and Mihiret, 14 – who were arrested for handing out Christian books in their village. The oldest was beaten, and the three of them were thrown in jail. But it didn't dampen their faith. A source who was able to visit them reported that they said - "This (suffering) is an honour for us." The oldest, Eden said: "We should expect persecution. We are not afraid. We are singing and praying here in prison" [https://www.vomcanada.com/october-20-2016.htm?types\[0\]=1](https://www.vomcanada.com/october-20-2016.htm?types[0]=1)

That's a powerful story of Christians standing firm in the face of opposition.

Now, I have to admit, that I doubt that we'll ever see anything quite like that in our lifetime in Canada. But then again, I would never have guessed that people would spray paint 'Hail Satan' on the side of our church.

As our culture moves farther away from its Judeo-Christian roots, it will become harder for us to follow Jesus.

As that happens, will we be prepared to say 'this suffering is an honour for us?' Compared to many Christians around the world, it costs us next to nothing to follow Jesus; I hope that this morning will give you some insight into what they are facing, and give you confidence to remain faithful to Jesus when persecution, whatever it may look like, strikes.

Turn with me to Revelation 13. Revelation 13.

Now Revelation 13 picks up hot on the heels of last week's events – remember? Satan was unable to overthrow God and he got kicked out of heaven and so now he roams the earth, looking to make war on all those who follow Jesus. Now Satan himself opposes believers, but he works through human agents as well. Here in chapter 13 (this week and next) we're going to meet a couple of his minions, just not the kind with yellow skin and blue overalls.

Let's look at Revelation 13, verse 1 –

And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name.

2 The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. (Rev 13:1-2 NIV). One of its heads seemed to have a fatal wound, but its fatal wound was healed.

What an introduction – I can almost picture that moment in James Bond films when the Bond girl or Bond himself comes up out of the water but here – boy – it's a monstrosity that comes up out of the water.

Ten horns, seven heads, ten crowns. Like a leopard, feet like a bear, mouth like a lion? Mortal wound that's healed. What's going on here?

This beast represents **the sum total** of humanity's efforts against God's purposes. Here's why I say that.

In Daniel 7, Daniel sees a vision of the future, just like John's. In Daniel's vision, he sees four beasts – each of them comes out of the sea (just like John's) – one is like a lion, one is like a bear, one is like a leopard and then the fourth is exceedingly different from all the rest and it has ten horns. Daniel is explicitly told that these beasts represent human kingdoms that will rise in succession and oppose the purposes of God in this world. Daniel sees a leopard beast, a bear beast, a lion beast and a totally different beast.

Now here in Revelation John sees all those beasts, mixed into one – this is a holy remix. The beasts retain their symbolism as unique human powers that will challenge God's authority and yet the Spirit of God has remixed the imagery to say that there is a beast yet to come who will arise and carry with him traces of every evil empire that has come before him. This beast is often referred to as 'the antichrist.'

The fact that the beast arises from the sea communicates that this is an evil beast. For people living in ancient Israel, the sea was nasty, scary, abysmal and so anything coming from the sea must be evil. Like this beast. John actually sees this beast in chapter 11 and there it says it rises from 'the abyss' – hence the evil thing coming from the sea is 'abysmal' – the title of this sermon and my poor attempt at humour.

The fact that the beast has a mortal wound, which has been healed, is an intentional parody of Jesus' death and resurrection – people are meant to think of this beast as being 'Christ-like' having died and come back to life, but that's the only sense in which he is Christ-like.

The fact that it has crowns means that this beast has authority and do you see where this beast's power comes from? The end of verse 2 – the dragon (the dragon from chapter 12) gave his authority to the beast. The beast acts on Satan's behalf, with Satan's authority.

(By the way – do you recognize some of the features of the beast - seven heads, ten horns – we've heard that before, haven't we? Chapter 12 – Satan, the dragon, has seven heads and ten horns. This beast clearly derives from Satan. And people say I look **like MY dad!**).

So this beast represents human power and acts with Satan's authority;  
Now, what does it do with that authority? Let's continue in **verse 3** –

3 One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast.

4 Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?"

5 The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months.

6 He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven.

(Rev 13:3-6 NIV).

This is one thing the beast does - It **blasphemes** God, it detracts from God's unique majesty. The beast turns people's attention from God and gets them to honour it instead – that's verse 3 – the whole earth marveled and followed the beast.

You can see in the next verse how successful the beast is – do you recognize that song they sing in verse 4? Who is like the beast? Who can fight against it? That's not the beast's song, that's God's song! Just after the Exodus, Moses writes this song of praise where he says "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you-- majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" He's just destroyed the most powerful army in the world – Egypt – who can fight against Him? Do you see what's happened?

The beast has crossed out God's name and inserted his own. That's like me saying 'Hey Julie, I wrote you a song! And then singing 'My Julie, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine.' That's just wrong – it takes honour that rightly belongs to God.

Now I want you to notice that he's able to do this, but only for a limited time. In verse 5, it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months – you've seen that before. 42 months x 30 days months is 1260 days. Times, times and half a time from last week. The beast is permitted to blaspheme for that limited period of time, between Jesus' first coming and His return.

The beast blasphemes God. That's the first thing it does; the second is this – it **persecutes** God's people. Look at verse 7 -

7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. (again – borrowing from Jesus' rule to create its own propaganda)

8 All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast--all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.

(Rev 13:7-8 NIV).

The beast goes out to battle the saints and if it can't trick you into treating it like God, then it'll attempt destroy you. That's how the beast works – it either makes you its own or it will attempt to destroy you – 'if I can't have you, no one will.'

Now verse 8 is interesting because it introduces the beast's opposition – the Lamb that was slain from the Creation of the world. Who is the Lamb that was slain? It's Jesus. Think about all of the symbolism that was packed into the sacrifice of a lamb two weeks ago in our Passover/Communion sermon – remember? The death of a lamb means delivery from slavery, means salvation, means freedom, means life – it's no accident that John sees a *Lamb* slain and not a bull or a pigeon or something. This is just a reminder that what God did at the Exodus, God does through Jesus, a hundred times over.

The Lamb was slain from the creation of the world –that simply means that it was always God's plan for Jesus to die to ransom sinners, and God has all of THEIR names written in His book of life. That just means that even though they die, God will bring them back to life again. As surely as the Lamb who was slain got His life back, so too will we who trust Jesus have our lives back.

So we have the Lamb and we have the beast – the beast who blasphemes God and persecutes His people.

Let's talk about this beast. Who is it? What is it? Is it a person? Is it a kingdom? A force? When does it appear? Do we ever see it at work?

What do we do with this seven headed beast?

Keep your finger in Revelation 13 but flip ahead to **Revelation 17**, because there we meet the beast again and John learns more about the beast's identity. Verse 3 – chapter 17 –

<sup>3</sup> Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.

Sounds familiar doesn't it – that's our beast from chapter 13.

Slide down verse 8 – John gets all worked up but the angel says 'cool it John, I'll explain it to you' –

8 The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

[that is – the beast who was – is about to have his fatal wound and so become 'not' and he's going to come back to life.

And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

It lived and then it suffered a mortal wound and now it's back.

9 This calls for a mind with wisdom:

the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits;

[seven mountains eh? That reference kind of escapes us but 'seven mountains' to anyone in John's time would have immediately rung a bell. Rome. Rome was built on **seven hills** – those seven hills defined Rome the way the falls defined Niagara. So this beast is in some way Rome.

But apocalyptic loves mixed metaphors and so there is a further meaning –

10 They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while.

11 The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

So this beast represents seven powers and yet it is also an eighth power that is unique from the others and yet is still like them. Have you got a head ache yet?

Here's what to take away - throughout history, this beast has risen up with the power of Satan to blaspheme God and to persecute His people and then the beast is struck down, so he is not, and then he rises again, in another form, in another time to continue his blasphemy and persecution.

John, seeing this, would have immediately understood how this was playing out in the Roman Empire. The beast is Rome, but it is also a king of Rome, and John would have immediately thought of the emperor Nero – you know – **Nero fiddled** while Rome burned? That guy.

Nero was particularly beastly – It took him five tries but he eventually killed his own mother. Ancient sources tell how he would fix Christians to poles, then have them wrapped in flammable clothing and set ablaze as giant candles to light his wild garden parties. He insisted that he was himself a god. Blasphemy, persecution – it's all there.

Now Nero was a mess generally and after a few years in power the senate decided he was just too dangerous and so they declared him an enemy of the state. Nero killed himself – stabbed himself in the neck – but not long after that, there was a rumour that grew up saying that Nero would come back to life and renew his program of blasphemy and persecution. Now Nero didn't come back, so there's the king gone, but what about Rome itself? (Remember, in some way, the beast is the 7 hills). In the wake of Nero's death, Rome looked like it was about to fall, four emperors in one year, civil war all over the empire, until finally Vespasian came to power and Rome came back to life. And people marveled. And people trusted in the power of Rome instead of God.

Since then the beast has appeared again, in various forms throughout history, leading of course to wild speculation about who the beast is – at various times in history, people have identified as the beast the French revolutionaries, the pope, Hitler, JFK. And yes, if you google it, Donald Trump. And to be fair, I checked on Hilary Clinton and there were more people associating her with the woman riding the beast.

I'm reluctant though to name names because I think that Craig Keener is right – 'the issue is more the **pattern than the person**' (Keener, 342). The beasts of Daniel – one came after the other. The beast is seven kings but it is also the eighth king that comes after it. Any time you see a worldly power persecuting God's people and detracting from God's majesty, you see the beast at work. And that itself is a biblical idea – John, who saw this in Revelation had previously written in his first letter – 'this **antichrist is coming** and even so, more antichrists have come.'

18 Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

You see, there is a big one coming, but in the meantime, others have been at work.

I think we should put it like this – when I was in public school, we went on a field trip out to **Rondeau park** and we did a science experiment. We went to the beach and stood sticks straight up and down in the sand. And then we kept records of how the waves washed up on shore – there's a little one, there's a little one, there's a little one, there's a big one – and this beast appears similarly throughout history – a satanically empowered authority who blasphemes God and persecutes God's people – there's a little one, there's a little one and at the end of the age – there's the big one. He's the one that will bring about the greatest blasphemy and persecution of Christians before end.

But whether it's the big one or only a little one we face, we are called to stand against the beast and to remain faithful to God. Look back at **chapter 13, verse 9**.

9 He who has an ear, let him hear.

10 If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go.

If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.

This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints. (Rev 13:9-10 NIV).

If I may – **better to die faithful** to the God who brings the dead to life  
Than to live duped by the beast whose days are numbered.

We are called to look through the beast's blasphemy and persecution and endure.

But why should we endure? Right? It looks like the Beast is winning, doesn't it? Those Ethiopian girls got arrested for what, handing out books? Christians every day are threatened by an evil power that is clearly against our God. Why not submit and live out a quiet life of

respectability? Why not join the people around us who are astonished and follow the beast? I mean, it keeps appearing throughout history, no matter how many times it goes down. Why not say along with them - 'Who is like this beast? Who can make war on Him?

Because the true God can make war on him. The King of kings and Lord of Lords makes war on Him. The God who is the essence of goodness and perfection and justice will make war on the embodiment of evil.

**Revelation 17** puts it like this -

14 They (the beast and his lackeys) will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers" (Rev 17:14 NIV).

Rev 17:8, 11 Beast is going – to destruction

And by Revelation 19:16-20 (spoiler alert)- the king of kings and Lord of Lords captures the beast, throws him into the fiery lake of burning sulfur and dispenses with his followers.

That's what lays in store for the beast and his followers.

**Better to die** faithful to the God who brings the dead to life  
Than to live duped by the beast whose days are numbered.

Now I want you to notice – both the King of Kings and the dragon's beast have followers and I want you to notice that there are only two camps. You either follow the king or you follow the beast. And here's the scary part – we all start in the beast's camp. Each of us is quick to resist God, to question whether He knows best, and that puts us squarely in the beast's camp. If I consider my pre-Christian life, I realize how quick I was to marvel over things that were not God and how reluctant I was to honour God. Celebrities, special effects, world figures, impressive people, power for the sake of power – I loved them more than I loved God That made me like the beast, or at the least, his follower.

And if I was a follower of the beast, then the King of Kings had every reason to ride in and trample me – to send me to the same fate as the beast that I followed.

But King of Kings is merciful. Beyond measure. He Himself came – as a lamb – as a sacrifice that would ransom me back and He was slain for my sin. Jesus died on the Cross the death I deserved, so that I could abandon the sinking ship that was the beast's camp and follow Him. And then God brought Jesus back to life, to show that He was master over life and death. And when that happened, my name was written into His book of life so that even if I were to die at the hands of the beast, God will give me back my life in eternity.

Where's your name written? To whom do you pledge allegiance? The beast or the lamb? The beast who has 42 months or the King who rules forever? You can pray today – God, make me yours – forgive me for dabbling in the beast's camp; I turn from that deception, to follow you.

When you pray like that, you become a child of the King.

But let me say this – if you pray like that, and live it out faithfully, you may find that the beast will come after you. 'If I can't have you, no one will.' He wants you or he will persecute you but along with verse 10, I say to you and to myself – if anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword, he will be killed. This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints.

Better to die faithful to the God who raises the dead to life than to live a dupe of the beast whose days are numbered.

God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

6 So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.