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A Call for Endurance Revelation 12-13 Fr. William Klock

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John's Revelation has prompted innumerable speculations over the last two millennia, ranging from the reasonable to the bizarre to the downright goofy. The most fruitful root of such speculations is, without a doubt, this character John calls the "beast". Who is he? The Protestant Reformers pretty universally identified him with the Papacy for understandable reasons. Luther even wrote to Leo X and accused him directly of being the antichrist. Napoleon was accused of being the beast, mostly because he antagonized the Church—and if you finessed his name and title the right way it adds up to 666. Ditto for Hitler. Then there's JFK and the 666 votes he took in the electoral college—and his death from a head wound. I remember as a kid people speculating about Henry Kissinger, whose name adds up to 111, which is 666 divided by six. But Kissinger quickly gave way to Mikhail Gorbachev. I never heard anyone work up a 666 scheme, but the birthmark on his forehead was surely the "mark of the beast", or so people said. Never mind that a lot of the same people in those days were telling us that the mark of the beast was somehow also credit cards or barcodes. Then there was Ronald Wilson Reagan—each of his names contains six letters. And Barack Obama. The day after he was elected, the Illinois Pick Three lottery numbers in his home state were 666. And, of course, Saddam Hussein, who some folks claimed was setting out to rebuild ancient Babylon. More recently there have been schemes to connect Bill Gates with the beast and COVID vaccines as his "mark". Even Barney has fallen victim to these schemes. Not only was he corrupting our children, but "CVTE PVRPLE DINOSAVR"—yes indeed, it adds up to 666.

All these attempts to identify John's beast really highlight the folly of unhitching the biblical text from its context. No one seems to take seriously Jesus' promise that these things would take place in the lifetime of his disciples. And no one seems to consider that John was writing to a cluster of churches in Asia Minor in a specific time and setting in order to encourage them to stand firm in faith as all hell was about to break loose around them. How would any of these identifications have made sense to the people of those churches? And how would knowing an obscure connection between the devil and Leo X or Henry Kissinger be any kind of exhortation to them? Context is everything and what John wrote to them had to make sense to them in their situation. So far, John's vision has revealed the climax of the story of God and Israel, culminating in judgement on the old, faithless Israel and the vindication of the new. These are the events that Jesus warned of in his ministry. But that's not the end of things. The gospel was not for Israel alone. Israel's ministry had always been to the nations; they simply never fulfilled it. Last week we saw the witness of the Jewish Church, fulfilling what Elijah and Moses had never been able to do: to cause the nations not only to notice the God of Israel, but also to stir faith in them. The judgement of the old Israel and the vindication of the new now broadens the horizon and, as I said last week, John's vision now begins, itself, to broaden. From Jerusalem, it now turns to the nations.

With Chapter 12 John's attention is turned the sky. Imagine being out on a dark night and looking up into the depths of the sky and seeing the constellations. And as you look they come to life and you see a story unfold in the stars. That's, I think, the sense of what John sees now. Look at 12:1-6.

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a

great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

John sees a woman, a dragon, and a child. The woman is in the pains of childbirth and the dragon poises itself to devour the newborn child. The child is where we should begin. This is the Messiah. John uses the language of Psalm 2. That's the song where Israel sang about the Lord's anointed King who would rule the nations with a rod of iron. It's the psalm where the Lord says of this Messiah, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" (2:7). With that in mind we shouldn't take the birth of this child as his literal birth. In other words, this isn't Mary giving birth to the Baby Jesus. The signs John sees in the sky point to the resurrection of Jesus. Paul writes in Romans 1:4 that Jesus was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead."

And while John draws on the symbolism of Daniel to describe the dragon with his ten horns and seven heads, he tells us outright in verse 9 that this is the devil. The dragon is poised to devour the child, but the child—the Messiah—is rescued by God himself. At the cross the devil was sure of his victory, but at the empty tomb and in the ascension, his prize was snatched from him. With Jesus out of his grasp, he goes after the woman instead. Who is she? This is where it's crucial to remember to whom John is writing and why. Remember that Revelation is about tribulation, perseverance, and kingdom. It's meant to encourage the Church to stand firm even as the dragon pursues. God has rescued and vindicated his Messiah and he will do the same for his Church. For three and a half years the enemy will rage against Jerusalem as we've already

seen, but God will prepare a place for his own. Using the language of the Exodus John describes the woman being cared for in the wilderness. But why does the dragon go after the woman? John goes on in verses 7-12:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

John’s vision sort of reveals what’s going on behind the scenes—or in heaven or in the spiritual realm—at the cross. As much as Michael is traditionally seen as an archangel, I think there’s good reason to equate him with Jesus himself and with the “angel of the Lord” in the Old Testament. His description in Daniel is similar to the description of Jesus in Revelation 1. And in Daniel, the angels are unable to overcome the demons until Michael comes to their aid. Whatever the case, the key to this victory is the blood of the lamb, and the devil himself is thrown down by the saints. This is interesting and encouraging. As much as it is Jesus who defeats the devil by his blood, John says that the saints win their own victory over the devil by *his* blood and by *their* testimony. Jesus said something very similar on the return of his disciples

early in his ministry. He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom and they came back excited and saying, “Even the demons submit to us!” And Jesus said to them, “I saw satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority...over all the power of the enemy. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:18-20). Notice that it’s by the victory of the saints that “the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come” and that the accuser has been thrown down. This is a victory that, again, was won by Jesus, but the Church, especially in her persecution and witness, has a share in the victory of Jesus. And that’s because it’s the proclamation and witness of Jesus’ people that carries his authority to the nations. To put it in terms of Daniel’s prophecy, this is the coming of the son of man to receive authority and to bring judgement on the nations.

But the defeat of the devil in “heaven” means tribulation for his enemies on earth. This is the warning that John has been giving to the churches, but it also comes with a word of encouragement. Look at 12:13-17.

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

The imagery here and in the first part of the chapter identifies the woman with Israel. Amongst other things, the twelve stars, the sun, and the moon at her feet is the language of Joseph’s vision of his family. And, of course, it’s Israel that metaphorically gives birth to Jesus. He is the culmination of her story. But in Revelation, Israel stands judged because of her unfaithfulness. So the woman’s identity is narrower than just all of Israel. She represents the faithful of Israel, those who have kept covenant with the Lord and, more specifically now, the Jewish Church. They have seen the Lord’s Messiah and they’ve embraced him in faith. And failing to defeat Jesus, the dragon now goes after this “woman”.

John uses the language of the Exodus here. In Exodus 19:4 the Lord says to Israel, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Here, again, he rescues his people on eagles’ wings. The serpent pours out water—calling back to the Red Sea—but the Lord causes the earth to swallow it. And as we read in verse 6, like Israel, the Lord feeds the woman in the wilderness. For three and a half years the dragon wars against her and for three and a half years the Lord protects and cares for her. And this, more or less, reflects what happened in those days. The Romans warred against Jerusalem for three and a half years, the city was destroyed, thousands upon thousands were killed, but the Christians of Jerusalem heeded the warnings of Jesus, fled eastward into the wilderness, and were spared. So the dragon has been foiled twice and now the dragon goes off to make war on the rest of the woman’s children, on those “who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus”—on the fledgling gentile churches of the empire. This is where John’s vision reaches out to encompass those little churches scattered across Asia Minor.

Now, Chapter 13. Look at verses 1-4.

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and

blasphemous names on its heads. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

This beast rises from the sea, an image that tells us we're not talking about Israel anymore. In fact, from this point on John changes the source of most of his Old Testament imagery. Up to this point he's been drawing on images that speaks of judgement on Israel. Now he starts drawing on imagery that speaks of judgement on the pagan nations. This beast with its seven heads and ten horns is related to the dragon. It's part leopard, part bear, and part lion—three of Daniel's beasts representing the pagan empires that oppressed Israel, and that identifies it as yet another pagan empire, in this case Rome. This is made explicit later, in Chapter 17, where the angel tells John that the seven heads are the "seven mountains on which the woman is seated" (17:9), which can't be mistaken for anything but Rome.

To this beast the dragon gives his authority to rule the nations. And, yet, remember that even the dragon operates within the sovereignty of God. And as the dragon reaches for divinity, the beast parodies Jesus. Jesus died and rose again. The beast—or one of its heads—is mortally wounded (verse 14 says by a sword, for what that's worth), but the beast survives and the world marvels. The nations worship the beast and, in doing so, unwittingly worship the dragon who stands behind it. They marvel at his power and authority declaring, "Who is like the beast? Who can fight against it?" And, of course, that's just what we see in the historical record with regard to Rome. Rome conquered the known world, its emperors grasped at divinity, calling

themselves sons of God, and even when the emperors fell, the empire itself recovered. The mortal wound may be a reference to the assassination of Julius Caesar, the first Emperor, or to the suicide of Nero, which would take place not long after John wrote. Whichever it refers to, many expected the empire to fall into chaos, but both times it recovered and became stronger.

Think of those Caesars who demanded the worship of the people, making blasphemous claims at godhood, as we read verses 5-10:

And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

**If anyone is to be taken captive,
to captivity he goes;
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.
Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.**

The Emperor Nero was the first emperor to actively persecute the Church, and at Rome his persecution lasted three and a half years. To this evil king the dragon gives authority over every nation—the very authority won by Jesus in his resurrection and ascension. This is the set-up: The dragon and the beast have stolen what rightly belongs to Jesus. They and their worshippers will be judged and thrown down and those who belong to Jesus—those whose names are in the book of life—will be vindicated. John quotes words of warning from

Jeremiah 15:5-9, this time aimed at Jerusalem and apostate Israel: Jesus will set everything to rights. And so John says to the churches: "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." As Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Even when it doesn't look like it, Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has won.

But that's not all. John then sees a second beast. Look at verses 11-18.

Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. 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.

This is an unholy parody of the Trinity. The dragon tries to claim the position of the Father, the first beast tries to take the place of the Son, and the second beast tries to take the place of the Holy Spirit. If the first beast represents the emperors of Rome and their false claims of divinity, the second beast represents the imperial cult and its priests. Through a network of temples—temples that were particularly popular in the cities of Asia Minor to which John wrote—the people

were forced to acknowledge the divinity of the emperor and to worship him. Sometimes it was an obligatory and patriotic pinch of incense that everyone was required to offer to Caesar. Sometimes it was the expectation to set out a personal shrine to Caesar on the feast day that had his priests processing through the city. But every day it was dealing with the interweaving of this false religion with the social and economic life of the city. The law instructed the Hebrews to bind God's law to their forehead and to their hands. Some did it literally and still do, but the point was that they would remain faithful to the Lord and his covenant by meditating on his law with their minds that it might work out practically in their actions. Earlier we saw that Jesus marks his people similarly in baptism with the Holy Spirit. In contrast the people who worship the beast have centred themselves on him. The "mark of the beast" isn't a literal mark—as some have speculated, like a barcode, a computer chip, or a vaccine. It's simply the parody of the law in Israel and the Spirit in the Church. John prompts those brothers and sisters in First Century Asia Minor to ask: Who is our God? Who do we worship? What will we do when push comes to shove and we're forced to choose? Will we stand firm and give Jesus what we know he is due, or will we bow to pressure and give to the beast what belongs to Jesus?

Now, I don't think there was any doubt in the minds of John's hearers what any of this symbolism pointed to, but at the end of Chapter 13 John makes it clear in saying that the beast is a man and that this number is 666. What's that about? Well, ancient peoples didn't have separate numbering systems like we do. They had various ways of using the characters of their alphabets to represent numbers, which means that you could add up the numerical values of the letters in a name and come up with a number. In this case 666. John most likely wrote it this way in case the Romans got hold of his letter. They weren't stupid and would know that he was pointing to someone's name. His trick is that he wasn't adding up the numbers of a Greek or Latin name, but of that

name transliterated into Hebrew. *Neron Kaisar* in Hebrew letters works out to 666, if you add the values up. It doesn't match up with Nero's name in Greek or Latin, which any imperial censor would have assumed. The early church Fathers recognized this. And we even have one early variant textual tradition that changed the number to 616—the sum of Nero Caesar in Latin—a change made for the benefit of readers who didn't know Hebrew. Now, that said, I don't think John meant that the beast is Nero and Nero alone. The beast represents the emperors of Rome and Nero happened to be the current emperor at the time John wrote. It already would have been obvious that John was writing about Rome, but just in case there was any question, the 666 bit makes it clear.

But what do we do with this? Well, first, Friends, it means there's no reason for Christians to be wringing their hands or getting worked up about accidentally receiving the mark of the beast—or, for that matter, accusing other Christians of having received it. We're talking about events that happened almost two thousand years ago, but even then, there was no way any faithful Christians was going to be tricked into receiving the mark—into worshipping Caesar.

That said, John's exhortation to stand firm in the face of opposition is still as relevant today as it was then. Because of the witness of the Church, the gospel conquered Rome and brought down Caesar and the dragon's demonic parody of the Trinity. I don't think we realise just how different the world is today because of the power of the gospel. The world has been radically transformed and even today's post-Christian world that is often hostile to us continues to thrive on the capital of a world once transformed by the gospel. But that doesn't mean we aren't surrounded by opposition and hostility. We need to hear Revelation's exhortation to stand firm in faith, Brothers and Sisters, and to remember that we do so not on our own strength, but as we stand on the victory that Jesus has won at the cross, remembering that we are an Easter people, following a resurrected Lord and living in expectant hope of our own

resurrection and of the renewal of all things.

And we stand firm, not for our own sake, but because even though it is Jesus who has won the ultimate victory, John reminds us here that we have an essential part to play. Jesus doesn't save us from sin and death to then sit out the war behind the line while he fights the battle alone. God has called and created a people for a reason: to carry the good news to the world. And in that, as Jesus' people, we have a part in the victory of the gospel over sin and death. So stand firm. Fight the good fight. Go out in the power of the Spirit and with the word of God to proclaim the good news, for Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

Let's pray: Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the many and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*