

Revelation 13 — Who Gets Your Allegiance?

Introduction

We have just come through Revelation 12, where John showed us a great red dragon, a woman, a child, and a war in heaven. The dragon represents Satan, and although he is terrifying, he is not victorious. He cannot devour the child. He cannot win the war in heaven. He cannot destroy the woman. Finally, he goes off to make war against the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Yeshua, that is, believers in Yeshua. Now, in Chapter 13, John shows us something of how that war is conducted. The dragon does not merely roar from heaven or chase people through the wilderness. He works through earthly powers, political systems, religious authorities, and the demands they place upon ordinary people.

Before we dig further, remember the two great themes that have been guiding us through Revelation. The first is endurance. Hang in there. Whatever troubles God's people face, those troubles are temporary. They may be severe, they may last longer than we would like, and some believers may even die because of opponents challenging their faithfulness. But suffering is not the end of the story. The second theme is worship. If God is the One who finally triumphs, then He deserves our praise, our trust, and our allegiance right now. These two themes belong together. We endure because we know who wins, and we worship because we know who is worthy.

Chapter 13 presents us with two beasts, a wounded head, astonishing signs, a mark on the hand or forehead, and the number 666. Those images have fascinated people for centuries. Some readers seem more interested in identifying the beast than in following the Lamb. Every new political leader, financial system, or technological development becomes another candidate for fulfilling John's vision. But remember where John was when he received this revelation. He was on Patmos in the Aegean Sea, separated from the congregations of Asia Minor, living under the sole authority of Rome. He was writing to people who already knew what it meant for an earthly government to demand loyalties that properly belonged to God. If Revelation 13 meant nothing to them, we have probably misunderstood its purpose.

The question running through this chapter is therefore not merely, Who is the beast or what does 666 represent? Rather it is, Who gets your allegiance? Who has the right to tell you whom to worship? What happens when political power claims divine authority, when religious voices support that claim, and when economic pressure is used to make people conform? And what are the people of God supposed to do when refusing to conform becomes costly?

1. The Beast from the Sea — Revelation 13:1-4

John sees a beast rising from the sea, having ten horns, seven heads, ten crowns, and blasphemous names upon its heads. This is a strange creature, but we have already met something remarkably similar. In Chapter 12, the dragon had seven heads and ten horns. Now the beast carries the characteristics of the dragon, and verse 2 makes the connection explicit: the dragon gives the beast his power, his throne, and great authority. The beast is not an independent power that happens to be wicked. John portrays an earthly power receiving its strength from the spiritual enemy we encountered in the previous chapter.

What does it mean that the beast comes from the sea? John was on an island surrounded by water, and the entire Mediterranean was central to the world in which he lived. Rome's military, commercial, and political influence depended in considerable measure upon its control of that sea. But the imagery also takes us into the Tanakh, where the sea can represent chaos, threatening nations, and forces hostile to God's purposes. Daniel 7 begins with four great beasts coming up from the sea. John is not inventing an entirely new symbolic vocabulary. He is drawing upon imagery already familiar to those who knew the Scriptures.

In Daniel's vision, the beasts resemble a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a fourth terrifying creature. They represent kingdoms that rise, dominate, and eventually fall. John reverses the order of the first three animals: his beast is like a leopard, with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion. The picture is almost grotesque, but the message is clear. John is gathering the characteristics of earlier oppressive kingdoms into one terrible image. The Roman Empire, which dominated the world of John's first readers, embodies the arrogance and violence of the empires that came before it. The names and borders change, but the temptation to claim absolute power remains.

Daniel 7 also gives us the contrast we need. The beasts rise and fall, but the Ancient of Days takes His seat. Then one like a Son of Man comes before Him and receives dominion, glory, and a kingdom that will not pass away (7:13-14). That is the great difference between the beast and Yeshua. The beast grasps at authority and receives power from the dragon. The Son of Man receives His kingdom from God the Father. Earthly kingdoms can look permanent while they dominate the landscape, but their time is limited. History confirms kingdoms come and go. The kingdom given to the Son of Man is everlasting.

John says that the beast bears blasphemous names. Blasphemy is not merely the use of offensive religious language. Here it is the claiming of honor, titles, and worship that belong to God alone. Roman emperors could be celebrated with divine titles, and the imperial cult was part of the religious and political environment of Asia Minor. To honor the emperor was one thing. To treat him as divine was something else entirely. Jewish people had faced a similar demand two centuries earlier under Antiochus IV Epiphanes,

whose policies helped provoke the Maccabean revolt remembered at Chanukah. The issue was not simply who governed the land, but whether an earthly ruler could require God's people to give him the honor due only to God.

John then sees one of the beast's heads as though it had been fatally wounded, yet its wound was healed. The language deliberately resembles what we have already heard about the Lamb who was slain and yet lives. Here is an imitation of resurrection, an apparent recovery that astonishes the world. The Roman world knew rumors associated with Nero's death and possible return, and that historical background may help explain the image. But John does not identify the wounded head by name, so I am cautious about insisting upon one historical explanation. What is unmistakable is the contrast: the beast appears to imitate the Lamb. The true Messiah conquered through death and resurrection; the beast presents a counterfeit that draws admiration and worship.

The world marvels and asks, "Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?" Notice the language. The question sounds almost like a parody of biblical praise. Scripture repeatedly asks, "Who is like You?" when speaking of the incomparable God. (Exodus 15:11) Now people are directing that kind of admiration toward an earthly power. Rome could seem invincible. Josephus records how Agrippa II warned the Jewish people against rebelling against Rome by describing the overwhelming strength of Roman arms. The message was simple: no one can stand against Rome. Yet John has already shown us a supreme throne in heaven, and no emperor of Rome is sitting on it.

2. Power That Demands Worship — Revelation 13:5–10

The beast is given a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months. Once again we meet the limited period that has appeared throughout Revelation: forty-two months, 1,260 days, three and a half years, or a time, times, and half a time. We should recognize the pattern by now. John is not handing us a calendar and asking us to calculate the date of the end. He is reminding suffering believers that the enemy's authority is limited. The beast is permitted to act, but he does not possess an unlimited future.

That distinction is enormously important. The beast speaks against God, His name, and His dwelling place. He is also permitted to make war against the saints and to overcome them. There is a word here that we must not hurry past: overcome. In Chapter 12, the believers overcame the dragon through the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony, and their willingness to remain faithful even in death. Now John says the beast is allowed to overcome the saints. How can both statements be true? Because the beast can defeat believers in the earthly sense without defeating them in the ultimate sense. He may imprison them, silence them, exile them, or kill them. But he cannot overturn what the Lamb has accomplished.

We sometimes overhear from some religionists in our day a version of faith that promises believers an easy life. Something like, “Follow Yeshua, and your troubles will disappear. You will enjoy prosperity, good health, and protection from every painful circumstance.” I don't know what world that describes, but it certainly is not the world John or the First Century believers knew. John himself was in exile. The congregations to which he wrote faced real pressure. Yeshua suffered, and His followers were not promised that they would be spared every experience He endured. Revelation is not a guarantee that nothing terrible will happen to us. It is a declaration that terrible things cannot undo God's final victory.

I think of Andrew Chan, the Australian who came to faith while imprisoned in Indonesia and was executed in 2015. His story was very much in the news then. He had committed serious crimes, and his conversion did not remove the legal consequences of those crimes. Yet his faith became central to the way he faced his final years and his death. His story raises a difficult but necessary question. Is faith valuable only if God gets us out of trouble? Or is Yeshua worthy of our allegiance even when the outcome is not what we have prayed for? Revelation answers that question by directing our attention beyond immediate circumstances.

Verse 10 concludes with the words, “Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.” Perseverance translates a Greek word, *hypomonē*, carrying the idea of remaining steadfast under pressure. I picture a branch holding fast to a tree in a violent storm. Other branches may break, and the wind may be fierce, but this branch remains connected. Perseverance is not pretending the storm isn't happening. It is remaining faithful while the storm is happening. The people of God are not told to defeat Rome by becoming a stronger version of Rome. They are called to endure, to remain faithful, and to trust the One whose kingdom outlasts every empire.

That is also what Yeshua modeled. He was mocked, falsely accused, beaten, and crucified. Those watching Him suffer thought they were witnessing His defeat. But the cross was the place where God's victory was being accomplished. Revelation repeatedly asks us to reconsider what winning and losing actually mean. If our definition of victory requires that believers never suffer, then we have misunderstood both the cross, the Gospel, God, and this book.

3. The Beast from the Earth — Revelation 13:11–15

John sees another beast, this one coming up from the earth. It has two horns like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon. That is a wonderfully revealing description. It looks somewhat like a lamb, but its voice betrays its true allegiance. Once again we meet imitation. The first beast imitates the Lamb's victory over death. The second beast resembles a lamb in appearance while communicating the dragon's message. Evil does not always announce

itself with frightening horns and an ugly face. Sometimes it borrows the appearance of something innocent, respectable, or even religious.

This second beast exercises the authority of the first beast and causes people to worship it. In the setting of Roman Asia Minor, I see a particularly strong connection with the local officials and religious structures that promoted emperor worship. The imperial cult was not merely an idea coming from a distant emperor in Rome. It was supported locally through temples, ceremonies, civic honors, and institutions that encouraged people to express their loyalty publicly. The second beast represents the machinery that persuades, pressures, and deceives people into giving the empire the worship it demands.

There is an interesting comparison here with John the Baptist. John came announcing someone greater than himself. His purpose was not to attract worship to himself, but to direct people toward Yeshua. The second beast also points beyond itself, but in the opposite direction. It promotes the first beast, authenticates its claims, and persuades people to worship the wrong object. We might call it a counterfeit prophetic ministry. Indeed, later in Revelation this figure is identified as the false prophet. The issue is not simply whether a religious voice is persuasive. The issue is where and to whom that voice directs our allegiance.

John describes great signs, even fire coming down from heaven, and the deception of those who dwell on the earth. The signs are impressive, but impressive signs do not automatically establish divine authority. The Torah had already warned Israel about this. Deuteronomy 13 says that even if a prophet or dreamer produces a sign that comes to pass, God's people must not follow that person if the message leads them after other gods. (Deuteronomy 13:1–5) The test is not merely whether something extraordinary happens. The test is whether the message remains faithful to the God who has already spoken.

That principle matters today. Charisma is not character. Eloquence is not truth. A large audience does not prove that a leader speaks for God, and apparent success is not evidence that God endorses everything a person teaches. History gives us plenty of examples of persuasive speakers who led enormous numbers of people toward terrible ends. The second beast reminds us that deception often works by making the wrong object of worship appear worthy, inevitable, and even beneficial.

The second beast then gives breath to an image of the first beast, so that the image appears to speak and demands worship. Those who refuse are threatened with death. Once again the Tanakh provides an important background. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar erected an enormous image and commanded people to bow before it. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego refused, even though they knew the furnace awaited them. Their response remains one of the great declarations of biblical faith: God is able to deliver us, but even if He does

not, we will not worship the image. That is precisely the kind of allegiance Revelation calls for.

I recall an early morning phone call I received from a sister who had not buried her Jewish believing husband after his death two days before, because she believed God wanted her to raise him from the dead. She asked me, “What do you think?” It was at that moment the fiery furnace of Daniel came to mind, and I told her, “God is indeed able to do so today, but even if He does not, plan to bury him tomorrow.” She heeded my advice and his funeral the next day was a good testimony to the realities of faith.

4. The Mark of the Beast — Revelation 13:16–17

Now we arrive at the image that has generated more speculation than almost anything else in both the book of Revelation and perhaps the entire Bible. The second beast causes people of every social standing—small and great, rich and poor, free and slave—to receive a mark on the right hand or forehead. Without the mark, they cannot buy or sell.

Immediately people begin imagining the technology of their own generation. For some it was a credit card. For others it was a barcode, an identification number, a computer chip, or some new form of electronic payment. But if we begin with modern technology, we risk missing what John's first readers would have recognized.

For a Jewish reader, the hand and forehead carry unmistakable biblical associations. In Exodus 13 and Deuteronomy 6 and 11, God's words are to be bound as a sign upon the hand and placed as frontlets between the eyes. Jewish people have expressed that command through tefillin, the small boxes containing passages of Torah that are bound to the arm and head with leather straps during prayer. The symbolism is powerful. Our thinking (forehead) and our doing (arms) belong to God. Our minds and our actions are to be shaped by His Word.

Now John shows us a counterfeit mark on the same parts of the body. The beast wants what belongs to God. He wants the mind, the actions, the identity, and the loyalty of those who live under his authority. This is not simply a question of whether something is physically written on someone's skin. Revelation has already spoken of God's servants being sealed, and coming up, Chapter 14 will show the Lamb's people bearing His name and His Father's name upon their foreheads. The opposing marks identify opposing allegiances. The question is whose people we are.

But the beast's mark also has an economic consequence. Those who refuse it are excluded from buying and selling. Here John brings the issue of worship into ordinary life. It is one thing to declare loyalty to God when that declaration costs us nothing. It is another when faithfulness affects our employment, business, reputation, or ability to participate in society. In the Roman world, civic and religious life were closely connected. Participation

in public worship could be bound up with commercial and social relationships. John shows us a system in which economic pressure reinforces religious conformity.

That does not mean every form of identification, every bank card, or every technological development is the mark of the beast. We should be very careful before attaching that label to something John has not identified. The issue is allegiance to a power that sets itself against God and demands worship. If a government requires us to pay taxes or use an ordinary means of payment, that is not the same thing as requiring us to deny Yeshua. But if participation in society requires us to give another power the honor that belongs to God, then the conflict of Revelation 13 has become very real.

During the 2020 COVID pandemic, some alleged that submitting to taking a vaccine without which jobs would be lost was the ‘mark of the beast.’ Our answer continued and continues to be whatever else the mark is, it involves worship and no vaccine or medical professional is asking for praise and worship. Don’t be confused—look for the allegiance!

We need to hear the pastoral warning beneath the dramatic imagery. The beast does not simply ask people what they believe. He attempts to make obedience costly and compromise convenient. And the people of God must decide whether their allegiance can be bought.

5. The Number of the Beast — Revelation 13:18

“Here is wisdom,” John writes. “Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six.” (13:18) Those words have launched an astonishing number of calculations. People have taken names, assigned numerical values to letters, changed languages, adjusted spellings, and eventually discovered that some historic or modern politician or public figure supposedly adds up to 666. The problem is that with enough ingenuity, almost anyone can be made to fit a numerical theory. We can become so busy calculating that we stop listening to what John is saying.

There is, however, a serious historical explanation that deserves attention. Letters in Hebrew, Greek, and other ancient languages could also function as numbers. This makes the practice of calculating the numerical value of a name—often called gematria—relevant to the passage. The Hebrew spelling of “Nero Caesar” can produce the number 666, and a shorter form of the name can produce 616, a number found in some ancient manuscripts of Revelation. That makes Nero a plausible historical reference, particularly given the chapter's Roman setting and John’s reluctance to name Rome directly. It is a stronger explanation than arbitrarily assigning numbers to the names of modern political leaders.

But I also think John is doing something larger with the number. Throughout Scripture, numbers, as we have seen, can communicate meaning as well as quantity. Seven regularly

suggests completeness or fullness. Six falls short of seven. It approaches completeness but never arrives. Repeated three times, six becomes a striking picture of human pretension: man claiming to be what only God can be. The beast imitates the Lamb, claims divine honor, demands worship, and presents himself as the final authority. Yet for all his crowns, signs, and apparent invincibility, he remains a creature. He is not God.

I was a high school mathematics teacher in the 1970s. I love maths. But we should not turn that symbolic observation into a mathematical proof. John does specifically invite calculation, and the Nero interpretation takes that invitation seriously. But the broader theological message is consistent with the entire chapter. The beast's power is borrowed, his authority is limited, his resurrection is an imitation, and his claims to divinity are false. Six hundred and sixty-six may look impressive, but it is not the name above every name. The beast can demand worship, but he cannot make himself worthy of it.

That brings us back to the question with which we began. Who gets your allegiance? Not merely whose name can we calculate, or which ruler can we identify, but whose authority will govern our lives? The beast wants to be treated as ultimate. Revelation tells us that only God and His Messiah are ultimate. Everything else, however powerful it appears, must eventually give way.

What Are We Supposed to Do?

The first response is to recognize counterfeit worship. We are surrounded by people and institutions that ask for loyalty, and many of those loyalties are perfectly legitimate within their proper limits. We can respect government, participate in society, work honestly, and fulfill our responsibilities as citizens. But none of those loyalties is absolute. When a human authority claims what belongs to God, believers must recognize the difference between respect and worship. We can honor an office without making its occupant divine. We can obey legitimate laws without surrendering our conscience to an earthly ruler.

Second, we must learn to discern the voice behind the appearance. The second beast looked like a lamb but spoke like a dragon. That is a warning against being impressed merely by outward respectability, persuasive language, apparent miracles, or institutional success. The test of a spiritual message is whether it directs us toward the God revealed in Scripture and toward faithfulness to Yeshua. We need the Tanakh open, our minds engaged, and our hearts submitted to God. Not every impressive voice deserves to be followed.

Third, we must prepare ourselves for faithfulness that costs something. Revelation 13 does not promise an escape from every form of suffering. The beast makes war against the saints, and some suffer terribly. Yet John calls for perseverance and faith. We should not go looking for persecution, and we should not confuse every inconvenience with persecution.

But neither should we build a faith that collapses the moment obedience becomes uncomfortable. If our allegiance to Yeshua depends upon our circumstances remaining pleasant, then we have built it upon something much less secure than the Lamb.

Finally, worship God. That is not a decorative conclusion to an otherwise frightening chapter. It is the heart of the matter. The dragon wants worship. The first beast receives worship. The second beast enforces worship. The whole chapter is about worship directed toward the wrong object. The answer is not merely to reject the beast, but to give God what belongs to Him. We know who sits upon the throne. We know who was slain and yet lives. We know whose kingdom will endure. So hang in there, and worship the One who is worthy.

Takeaways

- The beast demands worship; the Lamb deserves it.
- Allegiance to God cannot be bought.
- The beast's time is limited. God's kingdom is not.

Memory Verse

Revelation 13:10

“Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.”

What's Next? — Revelation 14

After the beasts, the threats, the counterfeit signs, 666, and the mark of allegiance, John looks again. This time he sees the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him are 144,000 who have His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads. What a contrast! The beast marks those who belong to him, but the Lamb's people bear the name of the One who redeemed them. The beast threatens and coerces; the Lamb has purchased His people and they follow Him wherever He goes.

And then we hear something very different from the beast's arrogant words: a new song. Chapter 14 will bring us back to worship, to the faithfulness of the redeemed, and to the certainty of God's judgment upon Babylon. John will show us that the powers demanding allegiance today will not stand forever. The Lamb will stand, His people will be with Him, and God's purposes will prevail.

So the question at the end of Chapter 13 is the question that prepares us for Chapter 14: When the world demands your allegiance, whose name will you bear?