

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one in charge of all things and who has authority over all things, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

My friends, I have no earthly idea when Jesus plans on returning. I don't know when judgment day will finally arrive. The reality is, no one knows the day nor the hour. Jesus said the great and awesome day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Only God, our Father knows. We do have signs and wonders. Great earthquakes, and famines; pestilence and pandemic, unending wars, but are these signs of the end times or are they just a Tuesday in our world?

Lots of people have made millions of dollars in the End Times business. Some churches literally have been founded on these Eschatological doctrines. Why would so many flock to such unbiblical doctrines such as the Rapture or being left behind? These concepts only arose in the 1830s when a man named John Nelson Darby imagined this scenario in the clouds. The idea was popularized by Cyrus I. Scofield, an American minister who published a famous reference Bible in 1908. Scofield, like Darby, read the Book of Revelation as a vision of the future, not a fiery dream of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. I find it incredulous that a man named John, sitting on an island in the Mediterranean would write a Book foreseeing the future thousands of years in the future. It's much more believable that he was writing to his Brothers and Sisters in Christ about the current persecutions by the Roman Government and trying to offer

them encouragement to remain faithful even under dire circumstances. So, as we proceed through this sermon and next week as we finish up our series in Revelation, I ask you to suspend your belief in the Rapture and everything you might have heard or read about being left behind and simply take the book of Revelation of Jesus Christ for what it is.

Today we heard John's description of the two beasts. One Beast comes from the sea and the other from the land. In Biblical terminology, the sea is sometimes a metaphor for the Gentiles or the Gentile territory. If that's so, then the Beast from the sea represents the Roman Empire. While the Sea represents the Gentiles, the land stands for the Jewish Religion, Pagan Religion, or religion in general. In John's Day the Christian Church faced persecution from both the Romans and from the Jewish leaders who were still trying to root out the followers of Jesus. Both of these Beasts were fueled by the dragon from Chapter 12, which we skipped over... The dragon is the metaphor for the devil. Last week I went through a litany of those from the early Church to today who have faced persecution and death at the hands of both the Jewish leaders and from the Roman Empire. Those facts are not in dispute.

So, what about these weird and scary beasts? Why does the sea beast have one head that's been mortally wounded, but somehow seems to have survived? Most scholars believe this crushed head represents the emperor Nero, the 5th

Roman emperor. He came to power at the ripe old age of 13. Remember Nero was the emperor who fiddled while the Christians burned. Historians tell us Nero instigated a huge fire in the Christian section of Rome in order to clear the land for one of his building projects. He was responsible for some of the worst early persecutions of the Church. On 9 June in AD 68, Nero committed suicide, becoming the first Roman Emperor to do so. After his death there was a period of civil war in Rome. Nero was the Emperor who began the crushing defeat and destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple. He sent his General, Vespasian in AD 67 to destroy Jerusalem. It took Vespasian 3 years, but in AD 70 Jerusalem fell and the Temple was utterly destroyed. Although this happened 2 years after his death, Nero was the Emperor responsible for ordering the massacre of both Jews and Christians living in Jerusalem. With Nero dead one head of the Roman beast was mortally wounded. In the year following Nero's death, Rome had four rulers. Historians say the Roman Empire and every territory it held was teetering on collapse. What happened to save Rome? It was General Vespasian, who after defeating Jerusalem returned and become the one who consolidated power and returned the Empire to stability. Thus the Beast had been mortally wounded, but was healed and survived.

The Roman historian Tacitus gives us some detail on how the Beast made war with the saints. Before he committed suicide, Nero inflicted the most exquisite

tortures on Christians. After Jesus, who was called the Christ was put to death under Pontus Pilate, His movement was thought to be put in check. When the Christian movement broke out again not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, of the crime of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer. As Nero's cruelty toward the Christians increased it became so hideous the public sentiment turned toward those being so severely persecuted. Once the public turned on Nero he fled Rome and eventually took his own life.

John writes that the Beast was allowed to do his bidding and wage war and to conquer the saints. I have to wonder why God would allow such horrific deaths to those God calls saints and children. Apparently, God values our freedom enough to allow even the worst of horrors to be inflicted upon the human race, by other humans. As we debate our freedom to choose to get vaccinated or not this

issue is clearly still relevant today... The end result of the persecutions were that the blood of the martyrs watered the fields of Christianity. The more people who were killed, the more who were drawn to the faith. Christianity has never grown so fast as when it was under persecution and oppression. It hasn't really changed too much today. If you look around the world the places where the Christian faith is dying, we also have the most religious freedom and little or no persecution. On the other hand, where it's growing and converting more and more people are the places where people are oppressed and where persecution still exists. So, does God allow the Beast to wage war on the Church in order to make it grow and spread? My answer to that question is always a resounding No Way! God never causes our pain and suffering, but God isn't above using our self-inflicted suffering or the suffering caused by Satan or one of his beasts to make good come out of the horrors we inflict upon one another.

Today, we face many Beasts. With our modern, sophisticated reasoning and rationale, we don't always attribute our troubles as directly to Satan as people did in John's day, but I still believe Satan or the Devil is behind many, if not the vast majority of the problems we face as a congregation and that our Country faces today. Carl Marx famously said that religion is the opiate of the people. Unfortunately, far too many people have succumbed to Marx's opiates. I believe Christianity is far from an opiate. Rather it's a call to remain faithful to following

Jesus Our Lord and Savior. It's a call to continue the race until we also receive our crown and our seat at the Banquet of the Lamb.

May we never tire of the fight to put Satan down no matter what hideous form his beasts may take in our lives. May we look to the lives of the martyrs who went before us for inspiration to keep fighting our own monsters weather they come from the sea or from the land. May we remember who wins the battle and indeed the whole war. Revelation is pretty scary if all you read is chapters 6 through 20. But hold on because next week we get to see the pay off for those who hold fast to the savior. May we have strength for our own personal fights with the devil until we get to experience the great victory for ourselves. Amen.