

Revelation — Lesson 18

13:3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder.

One of the heads seemed to have a mortal wound. A better translation is given in the ASV — “And I saw one of its heads as though it had been smitten unto death.” The phrase “as though it had been smitten” simply means that the head was portrayed as having been slain. It does *not* necessarily mean that the head only appeared to have been slain. Remember Revelation 5:6– “I saw a Lamb [Jesus] standing, as though it had been slain.” The lamb had been slain and was portrayed as such.

Did the wound kill the entire beast or just the head? Later, in verse 12 we find out that it kills the entire beast — “its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed.” That is, the entire beast dies when one of its heads dies. Whatever this beast is (and we will discuss that point in just a moment), it is inextricably linked to its seven heads (as we would expect). If, as we have suggested, these seven heads are the emperors of Rome, then this beast is something that lives and dies with them. We have wondered before whether the focus of these judgments is Rome itself or these early emperors of Rome. This detail supports the latter view.

Which emperor is depicted by this head that is slain? To help us answer that question, we once again turn to our angelic commentator in Chapter 17. In Revelation 17:8 we read:

The beast that you saw **was, and is not, and is to ascend** from the bottomless pit and go to perdition; 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 behold the beast, **because it was and is not and is to come.**

That verse tells us that the first beast “was and is not and is to come.” Here in verse 3 we see a head on that beast that dies but is then healed, and from verse 12 we know that it was the beast itself that died and was healed. What sort of beast could be said to have died and then come back to life? And whatever sort of beast it was, the statement in 17:8 that it “is not” suggests that when this vision was received, the beast had already died, but had not yet come back to life. What is this beast?

The answer is that this first beast represents Rome (no surprise there), but it does so from a particular perspective — the beast depicts Rome as a civil persecutor of God’s people, which reached its heights in the first century under Nero and Domitian. How do we know that? Two reasons. First, the description of the beast tells us that it is a persecutor, and second, the focus on its heads is a focus on the emperors of Rome. Putting those together, we see a beast that depicts the Roman persecution from the standpoint of the Roman emperors, that is, from the standpoint of the Roman civil authorities. The government ordained by God had gone bad and turned against the people of God. The first beast denotes this rogue Roman government.

In a moment, we will meet a second beast in this chapter, and we will see that it is also a persecutor. In fact, the second beast will kill those who refuse to worship the first beast. There is no doubt that the descriptions of these beasts overlap, and that both show Rome as a persecutor, but as we will see when we get to the second beast, they do so from different angles.

If our view of this first beast is correct, then the death of the first beast meant an end or at least a dramatic drop in persecution by the civil authorities, and the resurrection of the beast would mean a sudden reappearance of that persecution.

Did that happen? Yes. Recall our earlier comments about Nero and Domitian. Tertullian said that Nero was “the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood,” and Eusebius wrote that Domitian “finally showed himself the successor of Nero’s campaign of hostility to God. He was the second to promote persecution against us.”

This image of the beast coming back to life has an interesting historical parallel. After the death of Nero in A.D. 68, there were many rumors that he had in fact not died but rather was planning to return and retake Rome. This belief came to be called the Nero Redivivus Legend. The earliest written version of the legend is found in the Sibylline Oracles, which claim that Nero did not really die but fled to Parthia, where he would build a large army and return to Rome to destroy it. At least three Nero imposters emerged to lead rebellions. The first, who sang and played the lyre and whose face was similar to that of the dead emperor, appeared in A.D. 69 during the reign of Vitellius. Sometime during the reign of Titus there was another impostor who appeared in Asia and also sang to the accompaniment of the lyre and looked like Nero. Twenty years after Nero's death, during the reign of Domitian, there was a third pretender. Domitian himself was regarded by some as the Nero Redivivus.

Why would Nero Redivivus have been so frightening? What sort of persecution occurred under Nero? What sort of person was Nero? Suetonius tells us the following about Nero:

He castrated the boy Sporus and actually tried to make a woman of him; and he married him with all the usual ceremonies, including a dowry and a bridal veil, took him to his home attended by a great throng, and treated him as his wife. And the witty jest that someone made is still current, that it would have been well for the world if Nero's father Domitius had had that kind of wife.

We are also told that Nero married his step-sister and that he murdered or had murdered his step-father, his mother, and his wife. He first tried to kill his mother, Agrippina by putting her aboard a boat that had been constructed to collapse, but after she survived, he had her hacked to pieces by his soldiers. (It tells us something about Nero's mother that he was *cheered* by the Romans when he returned to Rome after the deed was done!) He took the wife of his closest friend (Otho) as his mistress and later kicked her to death when she was with child. In A.D. 64, he set fire to Rome so that he could rebuild it, and when suspicion turned on him, he blamed the Christians, who all

knew were anticipating a fiery end of the world. As one modern historian puts it, “The belief that the fire had been started deliberately became so prevalent that Nero was forced to point a finger away from himself. He singled out the strange eastern cultists called Christians.” Tacitus describes Nero’s subsequent persecution of Christians in this way:

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.

In short, it would be difficult to find a greater enemy of God and of God’s people than the Roman emperor Nero — and the rumor of the day was that this great enemy was about to return.

Chaos and civil war followed the death of Nero. Nero wasn’t alone in death: The Julio-Claudian Dynasty fell with him. When Nero came to power in 54, there were six other males who traced their heritage back to Augustus or Claudius. These men all died during Nero’s reign. Nero’s death left a political vacuum that many rushed to occupy.

Initially, the leader of the Spanish rebellion, Galba, was the accepted replacement. But the sole basis of his regime was his soldiers’ support, and when they turned against him in January 69, he was murdered. Nero’s friend Otho attempted to take Galba’s place, but he was immediately challenged by the legions on the Rhine, who wanted their commander, Vitellius, installed as emperor. The German legions invaded Italy and toppled Otho in April. In Palestine, the war against Jewish rebels was coming to an end, and the troops there proclaimed their general, Vespasian. Another invasion of Italy followed, Vitellius was removed, and Vespasian became emperor in December 69, thus becoming the fourth Roman emperor in 12 months.

So what then are we saying? The beast is Rome as a civil persecuting power. That beast came to the forefront under Nero, but when Nero died, so did the beast, as the persecution temporarily subsided. When Revelation was written, the beast was still dead, which also fits with

history. This book was written during a lull in the persecution that occurred during the reign of Vespasian. Later, though, the beast would come back to life under Domitian, who was in a sense Nero Redivivus. Tertullian called him “a limb of the bloody Nero.” Domitian represented a new beginning of persecution against God’s people. He was the eighth king.

4 Men 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?”

In this verse we see two of the most horrible images in this entire book: dragon worship and beast worship.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: “A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

If we worship the dragon, then like the dragon we will become. If we worship the beast, then like the beast we will become. And have no about it — dragon worship and beast worship are alive and well today!

As we have already discussed, this dragon is Satan who was the driving power behind Rome against the church. He had given his authority to Rome so that it would attack the church on his behalf.

And why did they worship the beast? Because it had died and come back to life! It was unstoppable! What we see here is a ghastly parody of Jesus, who truly died and came back to life. Like Pharaoh’s magicians, Rome is saying, “Look! We can do that, too!” In fact, this a theme that runs throughout this book, although it does so right beneath the surface. Barclay describes the question “Who is like the beast?” as a grim parody of the great question “Who is like thee, O Lord, among the gods?” in Exodus 15:11.

Just imagine this scene from the church's viewpoint. It must have almost seemed to them that even God was powerless to stop this beast. What hope did the church have against such a powerful, unstoppable beast? Would it ever be killed once and for all? Would it always come back from the dead? Could it ever be stopped?

The situation looks bleak, but the very next verse should provide hope to an alert reader! (If you don't see why verse 5 provides hope, then it is time for a review!)

5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months; 6 it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 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 tongue and nation, 8 and all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain. 9 If any one has an ear, let him hear: 10 If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Verse 5 tells us that this resurrected beast has authority for 42 months. Now that we know what the symbol means, this statement provides a reason to rejoice. A period of 42 months (or 3½ years — a broken seven) tells us that this situation was temporary. The beast might seem invincible, but God is telling us in verse 5 that all is not as it seems! Jesus died and rose from the dead, never to die again. That will *not* be true of this beast from the sea! Jesus is a 7! This beast is a

broken 7! (Keep that thought in mind as we inch ever closer to verse 18.)

The resurrected beast is pictured as haughty and blasphemous. Domitian, who required that he be addressed as “Our Lord God Domitian,” fits the bill on both counts. Remember the coins we looked at that described Domitian as a son of a god and that pictured his own infant son as a deified world conqueror reaching for 7 stars.

The resurrected beast makes war on the church and is pictured as actually conquering them. This is exactly the same situation we saw in 7:7 where the beast (Rome) came out of the bottomless pit and conquered and killed the two witnesses (the church). Here, as in Chapter 7, we are simply being shown the situation from the beast’s perspective. Rome thought it had defeated the church and so is shown here as defeating them — but things are not what they seem!

What is meant in verse 8 by the phrase “every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain”? (A parallel passage appears later in 17:8.) Does this mean that those in the book of life were predestined for salvation before they were even born, and that those not in the book were predestined for damnation before their birth? Of course not! How could it? The entire Bible screams out against such a heinous concept. It is not God’s will that anyone should perish! (2 Peter 3:9) It would seem difficult to reconcile that fact with the idea that God predestined the vast bulk of mankind to damnation before the world was created! A Christian should be repulsed by such an idea! Why proclaim the gospel if the Book of Life has already been filled up? And what about Revelation 3:5, which talks about God blotting names out of that book?

So what then is meant by verse 8? Paul tells us exactly what it means in Ephesian 1:4-6 —

According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself,

according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.

God's plan was that there would be a book of life and that those in his eternal kingdom would have their names in that book — and that was God's plan from before the foundation of the world.

We earlier discussed what it meant for God to mark his people as his own special possession, and that mark is tied to having one's name marked or recorded in the Book of Life. The Old Testament closes with a beautiful description of this idea in Malachi 3:16-17 —

Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.

One of the greatest Bible scholars I ever knew was Marion Williams, and here is what she wrote next to Malachi 3 in the margin of her Bible (which I now have): “No matter how lonely this life, how far from loved ones and friends, think on this splendid, magnificent truth: Almighty God says of us, ‘This one is mine’ — the ultimate recognition, the ultimate friendship.” Yes, God has a Book of Life. Yes, God has a Book of Remembrance. And, yes, that is the book you want to be in!

And what is meant by verse 10, which says, “If any one is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes; if any one slays with the sword, with the sword must he be slain.” This verse is made up of two quotes — one from Jeremiah and one from Jesus. In Jeremiah 15:2, the prophet was told to tell the people that those destined for death would go forth to death, those destined for the sword to the sword, those for famine to famine, and those for captivity to captivity. The idea there was that there is no escape from the decree of God. But verse 10 also quotes

Jesus in Matthew 26:52 that all who take up the sword will perish by the sword. There are at least three lessons in this verse.

First, Christians must accept the consequences that occur in this life from following Christ. We know those consequences will involve persecution, and part of taking up our cross is accepting those consequences.

Second, Christianity can never be defended with physical force. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 10:4, our weapons are not carnal. Barclay: "It is an intolerable paradox to defend the gospel of the love of God by using the violence of man."

Third, verse 10 ends by listing the weapons that are available to a Christian — steadfastness and loyalty. The Greek word translated steadfastness or endurance does not mean passive endurance but rather means courageously accepting the worst in this life so that we can turn it into glory for God. The Greek word translated loyalty or faith means fidelity that never wavers. Those were the weapons that Christians used in the first century to conquer the mighty Roman empire, and those same weapons will still conquer the strongholds of Satan today. Remember again 2 Corinthians 10:3-6 —

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

Was the church at war with Rome? Yes. Are we at war today with the godlessness that threatens to engulf us? Yes. Are our weapons carnal? No. Our weapons are steadfast endurance and loyalty to Christ. Nothing on earth can defeat us while we wield those weapons!

11 Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a

lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 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.

The first beast arose from the sea. In verse 11, we meet a second beast that arises from the earth.

Why are there two beasts? One reason is that (as we will soon see) each beast depicts Rome from a different perspective, and God wanted to show us two different perspectives. But is there a *symbolic* reason for having two beasts? Perhaps. Earlier, we saw the church depicted by *two* witnesses, and in our study of the seven heads followed by an eighth there were *two* that stood out — the one that died (Nero) and the eighth (Domitian). I think the use of *two* beasts is intended to focus our attention on the *two* witnesses (the church) and on the *two* great persecutors of the church (Nero and Domitian). Which pair will prevail?

The use of two could also be intended to focus our attention on the two dynasties of Roman emperors that are involved here. The first, the Julio-Claudians, started with Augustus and ended with Nero. The second, the Flavians, started with Vespasian and ended with Domitian. Is it a coincidence that the deaths of Nero and Domitian marked the ends of their respective dynasties? I think this historical fact is another reason why God shows us two beasts.

The first beast depicted Rome as a persecuting power. What does this second beast depict? As we always do, let's consider the clues.

The first thing we see about this beast is that it rises from the earth. This part of the beast's description stresses the human origin of this beast. In verse 18 we will see that it is given a "human number." This second beast is man-made. It is a beast made with human hands.

If you want an interesting Bible study exercise, trace through the Bible the concept of things made or not made with human hands. In Daniel 2:45, the great stone that represents the eternal kingdom of God (the

church) is described as a stone that “was cut out of the mountain **without hands.**” Also, recall:

- **Acts 17:24-25** God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples **made with hands**; **Neither is worshipped with men’s hands**, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.
- **2 Corinthians 5:1** For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house **not made with hands**, eternal in the heavens.
- **Colossians 2:11** In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision **made without hands**, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.
- **Galatians 1:11** But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is **not after man.**

There is a sharp line drawn in the Bible between those things made with human hands and those things that are not.

We will see other clues about this second beast in later chapters. In 16:13 and 19:20, the second beast is called “the false prophet.” That clue tells us that this beast is religious in nature, but when combined with the first clue we know that it is a man-made religion; that is, it is a false religion.

Verse 12 gives us yet another clue. This second beast causes men to worship the first beast. The first beast was focused on the Roman emperors as civil persecuting authorities, and so this second beast causes me to worship those Roman emperors.

Finally, verse 11 tells us that this second beast looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. It is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. What is it that shows up as a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Matthew 7:15 — “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” (And again, we see the parody of this beast trying to portray itself as Christ, the true lamb who was slain.) It is

also possible that verse 11 says that this lamb spoke like a *serpent*. If so, it would be pointing us straight back (yet again) to Genesis 3.

So, having considered the clues, what does this second beast depict? It depicts Rome, but from a different perspective than did the first beast. The first beast from the sea portrayed the civil persecuting side of Rome. This second beast from the earth portrays the perverted religious side of Rome.

These two aspects of Rome were just two sides of the same coin. They worked hand in hand to stir up persecution of the church. History tells us that the first beast (civil persecution) was likely worse under Nero than under Domitian, but the second beast (perverted religion) was likely worse under Domitian than under Nero.

13 It works great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of men; 14 and by the signs which it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast, it deceives those who dwell on earth, bidding them make an image for the beast which was wounded by the sword and yet lived; 15 and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.

Throughout this book, that which is genuine and from God has been accompanied by that which is false and from the earth, and the signs and wonders from God are no exception. Here we see that the beast also had signs and wonders, but of course they are just the false signs and the false wonders that even today generally accompany a false religion. Paul described such signs and wonders (and confirmed that they were false) when he described the lawless one (Domitian) in 2 Thessalonians 2:9 — “Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and **lying** wonders.” Verse 14 also confirms that these were false signs — they **deceived** those who dwell on the earth.

Stephen Benko in his book *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (page 128) writes that “certain elements in the official Roman religion were based on magical principles” and that “magic was an accepted form of religious piety.” History tells us that the Roman priests were both ventriloquists and magicians. Originally ventriloquism was a religious practise. The name comes from the Latin phrase meaning to speak from the stomach. The noises produced by the stomach were thought to be the voices of the dead, who took up residence in the stomach of the ventriloquist. The ventriloquist would then interpret the sounds, as they were thought able to speak to the dead, as well as to foretell the future. Roman priests used ventriloquism to make it appear as if statues of Roman emperors were speaking. An example of such a person may have been Elymas the sorcerer in Acts 13:8 who had influence over a Roman proconsul. And you remember what Paul said to him in verse 10 — “O full of all subtilty and all mischief, thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?”

Verse 15 says that this second beast would kill those who refused to worship the first beast. The magistrate and Roman religious hierarchy had the power to impose death on those who refused to confess Caesar as Lord. Hailey: “This put the Christian in the position where he must confess either Christ or Caesar as Lord, thus choosing between immediate death and a few added years of life before eternal death.”

As an aside, we rightly include confession as a step in God’s plan of salvation, but I wonder sometimes if we fully appreciate its importance. We make the good confession prior to our baptism (as we should), but when we do we should think back on those prior times when the one making that confession was making a choice between Christ and Caesar with a sword held at his throat.

As another aside, the idolatry pictured again and again in this book points directly at Rome and these false religious practices. Those who think the villain in this book is Jerusalem have trouble explaining all of these references to idolatry.

16 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, 17 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. 18 This calls for wisdom: let him who has understanding reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six.

Verse 16 tells us that the beast marked his own people. Just as God marked his people in Chapter 7 to indicate that they were his, the beast marks his people in Chapter 13 for the same reason. God knows his people. Satan also knows his people. Everyone on earth then and everyone on earth today is wearing one mark or the other. Each of us belongs to someone.

Verse 17 tells us that no one could buy or sell without the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. When we discussed the letters to the seven churches in Chapters 2-3, we discussed the economic persecution that Christians suffered at the hands of the pagan guilds. A confession that Caesar is Lord was often required before one was allowed to buy or sell. Those who refused to make that confession were perceived as unpatriotic and suffered severe economic hardships.

Verse 18 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible, ranking up there with John 3:16. It has entered the public consciousness to a greater degree than any other verse in this book. People who can't even name the four gospels can still tell you more than you care to hear (from them, anyway) about 666.



Verse 18 begins with a call for wisdom, and yet that verse has spawned a great deal of foolishness. Did you know that the modern barcode is the mark of the beast and an indication that we are living in the end times? Some say so. The two bars that denote '6' appear at the beginning, middle, and end of every barcode found on the back cover of most books. Terry Cook in his book *The Mark of the New World Order* writes that "the entire [UPC barcode] system is very deceptively designed around the infamous numerical configuration, Biblically known as 666, the mark of the Antichrist or devil." Mary Stewart Relfe in her book *The New Money System 666* writes that "the Prophet John identified this Cashless System of Commerce 1900 years ago as one in which business would be transacted with a 'Mark' and a Number; the Mark will obviously be a Bar Code; the Number will be '666;' the combination of the two, about which you will read in this book, will be an integral part of the '666 System." Ridiculous? Yes, extremely so, but sadly not uncommon when it comes to explanations of 666.

Verse 18 tells us that the number of the beast is 666, a human number. What does that mean? The number 7 means perfection. By contrast, the number 6 means imperfection. The number 6 denotes something that had fallen hopelessly short of perfection. Man was created on the sixth day, and he fell from perfection. The number 3 is the number of divinity. Thus, three 6's depict something that has fallen hopelessly short of divine perfection. It had aspirations of being a 777, but it fell far short.

Does that symbol accurately describe this beast? Yes! No symbol could describe it any better! This beast represents the false perverted religious side of Rome. It represents the man-made Roman religion that worshiped the creature rather than the creator. God is 777! Rome is 666! It is a beautiful symbol that shows the stark contrast between God and his creation. Nothing man-made can ever be a 777.

Hailey: "666 stands for the complete and total failure of all human systems and efforts antagonistic to God and His Christ — all are doomed to ultimate and complete defeat and failure."

But can this really be all there is to 666! Surely it must be something more than that! We need to view this symbol in the proper perspective. The 666 symbol is just another symbol in this book full of symbols. It may stand apart from the other symbols in modern consciousness, but it does not stand apart from them in the text. Yes, 666 is a wonderfully descriptive symbol, but there are many other wonderfully descriptive symbols in Revelation. We must remember that this book was primarily intended to provide comfort to the first century Christians who were suffering intense persecution by Rome. If our interpretation of the book ignores that fundamental fact, then our interpretation is almost certainly wrong. The church needed to know that Rome was a 666! (Let's keep all of this in mind as we get closer to discussing the 1000 year reign *with* Christ in Revelation 20.)

And the church needs to understand today that there are many, many 666's in our own world. We are surrounded by man-made churches, man-made religions, and man-made philosophies — and all of them are just 666. There are many so-called churches today that should have 666 printed on their signs out front because they are a man-made church proclaiming a man-made gospel. Nothing made by man can ever be a 777. And on that great last day, the last thing you want to rely on is a 666. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) That name is 777!

Next week we will consider another possible significance for 666.