

Good morning! It's great to be back with you today. I've missed you all the last few weeks as I was traveling to a different part of the world to visit some missionaries we support. Because of the persecution where they work, I can't mention the country by name, but it's a country that is over 99% Muslim. Christians represent less than 1/10 of 1% of the population, and the Christians who are there must live very carefully. The government pays people for information about the whereabouts and activities of Christians. If missionaries are identified, they are arrested and deported. There is not a single "official church building" in the entire country. It's illegal. All the people our missionaries lead to faith have to meet for worship in secret, in small groups of 5-15 people. Our missionaries are not only leading people to faith, they are translating the Bible into the local language so natives in this country will be able to read and understand God's word. They are doing such good, important work. They asked me to share their gratitude with you. They wouldn't be able to be where they are or do the work they are doing without your generosity. When you give to The Creek, you are not only supporting ministry here in central Indiana, you are helping people in other parts of the world that don't know Jesus have the chance to hear about him and be able to read the Bible in their language. Thank you!!

While I was there, I asked our mission partners, given the severity of the opposition, what it's like when they lead someone to Christ. They said it's usually very difficult. They've seen new believers assaulted and hospitalized by their own family members. They've seen people fired from their jobs. Of their first seven converts, six fled the country because of death threats from family members. I asked them, "How do you prepare someone who is brand new to faith, who is leaving Islam to follow Jesus, to handle opposition like that?" I was blown away by their response. They live in an old city that was occupied by the Romans a few thousand years ago. The Romans built an amphitheater there and held gladiatorial games, where oftentimes Christians were martyred for their faith. In 203 AD, two Christian women, who were both young mothers, breastfeeding their children, were arrested, thrown into this amphitheater, trampled by a wild bull, then beheaded. When our missionaries lead Muslims to faith in Christ, knowing they are going to experience extreme persecution, they take them outside of town to this very amphitheater, and they tell these people, "This is your true heritage. In this very city, for two thousand years, there have been faithful saints who loved Jesus more than they loved this life." I got to share meals with some of the people they are leading to the faith—they have a passion and love for Jesus that is inspiring beyond words.

Doesn't it break your heart that persecution like that happens, that throughout history, Christians have been killed; that today, Christians are kicked out of countries, churches must meet in secret underground because their government will arrest them, new converts will be assaulted and have to leave the country under threat of their life? Let me ask you—why do you think that is? Why are some governments so extreme? Why is persecution in some parts of the world so intense? The answer is found for us Revelation.

Last week we left off in Revelation 12, where we saw Satan depicted as an enormous red dragon. This red dragon tried to kill Jesus. That didn't work. In fact, Jesus defeated him, and through the cross and resurrection, kicked him out of heaven. That seems like a massive victory for everyone, right? Satan is kicked out of heaven, But there is bad news. Revelation 12:12 says, "Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short." Revelation 12 tells us that Satan is coming after us; Revelation 13 tells us how. It's not necessarily how we suspect. It's not through tempting us to get drunk or trying to convince us to be greedy with our money or to cheat on our taxes, to live for pleasure, to question his existence or goodness. Sure, he's doing those things, but those are all small potatoes. Those are all ways he messes with individual lives, but Satan is so much more maniacal and strategic than that. Satan is not only trying to ruin your life, he's

trying to ruin the world. (He's not just a sniper; he drops atomic bombs.) Revelation 13 tells us how he does it: Satan attacks humanity through evil governments and false religions.

Evil governments. False religions. These are the agents through which Satan wages his wretched war against God's people on a global scale. Why are Christians in the country I just visited arrested and assaulted? Why is over 99% of the country I visited blinded by the darkness of Islam? Revelation pulls back the curtain and says it's not random, it's not accidental: it's actually Satanic. Satan is the one behind that. Let's dive in, and we'll also see why it's relevant for our lives today.

The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. 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. Revelation 13:1-2

The dragon is standing next to the shore and he summons a beast out of the sea. The beast looks like a leopard, a bear, and a lion. The Bible constantly uses "beast" to refer to godless governments. Beast = Evil Governments. If you read the book of Daniel, you'll know exactly who these beasts represent. The leopard represents the Greek Empire. The bear represents the Persian Empire. The lion represents the Babylonian Empire. These are the governments that conquered God's people, shed their blood, killed them by the hundreds of thousands, tore down and burned their temple, and tried to force them to worship false gods. That's all clear and historical. But the beast in Revelation wasn't simply one of these. It had qualities of all of them, but somehow it also had its own unique characteristics. It's a hybrid beast and everyone in the first century would have undoubtedly seen that beast as the Roman Empire, a godless government that exploited, oppressed, and killed God's people. It was like governments who came before it, with many of the same aspects and elements, but it was a unique expression. What does Revelation say will happen with the beast? "One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed" (Revelation 13:3), which means all throughout history it appears as if the beast has been killed, but then it comes back in fresh form. Babylon is overthrown and you think the beast is dead, but it's replaced with Persia. Persia is overthrown but it's replaced with Greece. Greece is overthrown but it's replaced with Rome. Rome is overthrown, but all throughout history it's replaced with godless governments that act just like it. So the beast is not only the Roman Empire but also subsequent evil governments throughout history. As we've been saying all along in this study, Revelation is not describing things that happened in the past or that will happen in the future; Revelation describes things that always happen! This book is relevant in every generation. In every window throughout history, the beast is at work. When Stalin killed 60 million Russians, the beast was at work. When Mao killed 40 million Chinese, the beast was at work. When Hitler killed 17 million civilians, 6 million of them Jews, the beast was at work. Right now in North Korea, in China, in Iran, in Russia, in the country I just visited, the beast is at work. But if you pull the curtain back, you'll see it's not only a godless government exploiting and harming people, it's Satan. The devil is at work through the political apparatus of the government, trying to ruin people's lives at the largest scale possible.

Remember the key point from Revelation 13: Satan attacks humanity through evil governments (the first beast); he always has, always will. But that's not the only weapon Satan has in his arsenal. He also uses false religions (the second beast). Let's look at what we see next:

Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth...It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave,

to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666. (Revelation 13:11-18)

What Revelation 13 tells us is the same thing that has ultimately happened all throughout history: false religions work in tandem with evil governments, sharing power to deceive, coerce, and subjugate people. This was happening when Revelation was written. Rome wasn't simply an empire with incredible power; they had their own cult. They built temples to their emperors and said the emperors were divine. Domitian was emperor when Revelation was written. He reigned from 81-96 AD. He gave himself the title "dominus et deus pater," Latin for "our Lord and God." Every Roman city had priests who forced people to offer incense and say prayers to the emperor and call him "Lord and God." Those who would not do it had no place in society. It was the power of evil government working in tandem with false religion to deceive people.

Both beasts are still at work today! China is currently the largest country in the world. In recent months, the Chinese Communist Party has gone into churches and taken down pictures of Jesus and replaced them with pictures of Xi Jinping. This is false religion working hand in glove with the government, using the power of the government to deceive people. We support missionaries in India. I don't know if you have followed the news in the last year, but Hindu extremists have come to power in the government, and all over India, these extremists are raiding and burning churches. They are arresting Christians. They are confiscating property that belongs to Christians. Our missionaries who lead a church over there have had to flee their home and spend weeks hiding in the jungle in fear for their lives. They've been shot at numerous times, with bullets missing them by mere inches. It's a false religion, working with the power of an evil government to deceive and coerce people.

When Keren and I wanted to get married, we went down to the local courthouse, showed them our IDs, answered a few easy questions, paid \$15, and got our marriage license. In the country I visited last week, you not only have to show ID and pay a few dollars to get a marriage license. You have to stand before a judge and both the bride and the groom have to recite the Shahada—"There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet." If you don't say it, you can't get married in that country. It's the false religion of Islam, using the power of an evil government to compel people to deny Christ.

Behind all of this—the emperor worship in Rome 2000 years ago, the government-sponsored religious extremists in China and India, Islam in countries all throughout the Middle East—there is a beast at work. Revelation says Satan uses these false religions, oftentimes working in cooperation with the power of the local governments, to deceive the masses, persecute Christians, ruin lives, and keep people from believing in Jesus.

We could go into so many fascinating details here: the mark of the beast, 666, where it goes, what it means. If you want a longer dialogue about that, go to Emerson's class. He'll dive in deep on it. The key thing that we need to know is that Revelation 13:18 says, "This calls for wisdom." God wants us to be discerning. God pulls back the curtain so we can see how Satan uses governments, how Satan uses false religions, and then he says, "You must keep your eyes open, you must pay attention. Don't be duped by the devil. He is tricky. He is conniving. Be aware that he lies." Just because we live in a part of the world where our government doesn't persecute Christians and where we have religious liberty and a strong Judeo-Christian history doesn't mean that the beast is not at work in subtle ways.

I want to talk about two ways Satan is at work subtly in our world today: abortion and gender. As pastor to this congregation, I know many of you have had abortions or supported people who have had abortions. I know many of you struggle with gender dysphoria or love friends and family members with

gender dysphoria. Regardless of where you have been, God loves you. We love you. I love you. My purpose today is not to bring condemnation but to speak clearly and faithfully about how the enemy has come to steal, kill, and destroy.

Right now, our country has two political parties. One party used to be very strongly pro-life, but recently, probably for the sake of political expediency, has made a lot of concerning concessions. The other political party's number one issue is the right of a mother to kill the innocent life of her baby growing inside of her. It's so central to their platform that they brought mobile abortion clinics to their convention, put them up like they were food trucks! Their candidate had the audacity to tell Christians, and I quote, "You do not have to abandon your faith" to support their lethal policies. I'm not talking about the politicians who say that, but if you could pull back the curtain you would see into the spiritual realms and find that there is an animating force behind those words, behind the culture of death, behind the acceptance and even celebration of dismembering innocent life in the womb. Those words are a lie from the pit of hell; those lies are from the dragon, who wants to steal, kill, and destroy. More babies are killed in our country than Americans who have lost their lives in every war our nation has ever fought combined. It's evil. It's demonic. The beast is at work.

God is not only the author of life for every baby in the womb, the Bible says that God makes us in his image, male and female he created us. Gender is a gift from God. Manhood and womanhood are gifts from God. They are intrinsic to our identity. But the dragon is deceiving the inhabitants of our nation. We have a major political party in our country, and we have hospitals all over this nation, that instead of providing mental health and emotional care for children and adolescents who are uncomfortable in their bodies, they instead facilitate their chemical and physical castration. There are currently fourteen states in our country, where, if one or both parents are opposed to their child's transition, the state will remove the child from their family. They will take the child away from mom and dad, and the state will sponsor that child's mutilation. This is celebrated and championed by half our politicians and an even higher percentage of our media as a loving action. Stop and ask yourself: how is it possible? How could anyone believe something so deranged and horrific? Pull back the curtain—the beast is at work! This is how Satan is at work, not simply trying to tempt and seduce one person at a time, but millions at a time, destroying entire societies, civilizations, and cultures. Remember what Revelation 13:18 says: "This calls for wisdom." We need God to give us discernment, to open our eyes so we can see what's really happening in the spiritual realms, not only so that we know the enemy is at work, but also to know how to respond.

Look at the very next verses in Revelation 14:1-4.

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion [the dragon represents Satan, but **the Lamb** represents Jesus], and with him 144,000 [**144,000** in Revelation represents all the Christians alive on the earth; Jesus is there with his entire church] who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads [the **forehead** is where the beast wanted to put his mark, but instead of the mark of the beast, indicating they belong to the enemy, faithful Christian's have God's name written on us, indicating we belong to him]. And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder [the **roaring of rushing waters** is an exceedingly loud sound, but it's not chaos or clamor; it's worship]. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne [after hearing the notes, all God's people joined in the chorus and lifted their voices] and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they remained virgins. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

These final words—"They follow the Lamb wherever he goes"—are what we are called to do. We have an enemy who is trying to seduce us, deceive us, intimidate us, harm us, kill us, destroy us. But instead of believing his lies, we are called to listen to the lyrics of the Lamb, to tune our ears to heaven, absorb his eternal truth, and follow wherever he leads!