

Could it be... Satan?!
Eph 6:10-12, Rev 12-14,

So, back when I was a teenager, I used to stay up to watch Saturday night Live – and one of my favorite characters on the show was “Church Chat with the Church Lady” Imagine a most prim and proper Victorian-era.... talk show host, sort of like a mix between Mary Poppins and Jay Leno – who would interview various celebrities and politicians about the sordid details of their lives that had recently made the headlines.

And the Church Lady’s punch-line, the gimmick of this particular comedy sketch, was that she would inevitably inform her guest rather bluntly that what that they were doing was just disgusting and wrong and what could have possibly motivated them to do such a thing....

and before they could answer she would screw up her face and say with a shrill voice “Oh I don’t know... could it be.... Satan?!”

And The Church Lady wasn’t the first comedy sketch to use Satan as a punch-line; comedian Flip Wilson became famous in the ‘70’s with his jokes about people excusing their bad behavior by claiming “the Devil made me do it!”

And it’s supposed to be funny because nobody really believes that the devil made you do it.

And it’s ironic that people have made it into a laughing matter because it is partially true – the Devil does play some sort of role in regards to people’s behavior and their actions, the Devil does exert his influence in the events that go on around us in our day to day life – it’s not always obvious to us how that occurs – its usually only obvious that it has occurred.

You see friends, a big part of the reason that why SNL was able to run with the comedy sketch of the Church Lady in the late 80’s was because of all the televangelist scandals that erupted at the time – remember Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart?

These were godly men and women who ran ministries that touched the lives of millions of people but who somehow got lost along the way... and they ended up being exposed for immorality and fraud and as a result the gospel and the church took a huge credibility hit and our collective witness suffered.

And many people were just waiting for the other shoe to drop, to discover that Billy Graham was involved in some sort of scandal... fortunately He wasn't, but this wasn't the first time that Billy Graham had seen colleagues fall by the wayside for one reason or another.

Back in his early years Billy had a friend by the name of Charles Templeton, a Canadian evangelist who many thought would overturn the world with the gospel – in fact he and Billy were responsible for starting “Youth For Christ International”

but... somehow along the way Charles' faith began to waiver and in the end he turned his back on all his ministry and declared himself to be an agnostic – someone who doesn't believe it's possible to know the truth with any certainty.

This man who had led so many to faith in Christ – lost confidence in his own faith... Could it be... Satan? Absolutely!

And maybe you know your own Televangelists or Templetons – people whom you thought at one time were followers of Jesus Christ, very involved in the church, enthusiastic about their faith and all that...

And then they went off to university and lost their faith, or they got involved in the party scene and adopted a lifestyle of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, or they started working in the business world and suddenly the bottom line was the most important thing in their life...

Could it be Satan? Absolutely! But.... it is Satan at work in the manner that is revealed to us in the 4th Vision of Revelation, and waging war to attack and destroying individuals who, as it says in 12:17 - *“obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus”*

And to help him in this endeavor the Dragon enlists the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth, and so the 4th Vision is the story of the Spiritual conflict that is going on in the time between times that targets the individual believer – whether they realize it or not...

And in the three visions that we've looked at so far, we've received insight and understanding about the kinds of challenges which the church will face in ordinary everyday life, such as enduring various kinds of persecution, calamities in the natural world, war, disease, famine etc...

But in the 4th Vision, we see a visual and symbolic portrayal of the unseen realities that go on in this world and we see that there is a connection between events that occur in the spiritual dimension of this creation and the events that occur in our ordinary everyday life.

In other words what the church and individual believers are experiencing in the time between times is really a

manifestation of the war between the devil and God's heavenly forces.

But let me make sure we understand this correctly – I don't want to be misunderstood as saying that there is a separate spiritual realm which controls our physical realm, where "every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings."

No, its more along the lines of the sort of arrangement that conspiracy theorists love – unseen mysterious but powerful forces exerting their will and influence without being seen, operating behind institutions and public figures who appear to be in power but in reality somebody else is calling the shots – manipulating, controlling, directing things towards some hidden agenda and eliminating those who get too close to discovering the truth...

The 4th Vision of Revelation reveals this kind of spiritual activity to us so that we can see the battle that is taking place, understand it and respond to it.

Thus the structure of the Vision is fairly straightforward – right off the bat there are the images of a pregnant woman giving birth and a dragon positioned to devour the child and we can recognize how this is symbolically portraying the spiritual conflict that was taking place at Christ’s first coming – at his very birth.

With his failure to devour the child, the dragon attempts to destroy the woman and is thwarted in that as well – so he brings forward to helpers; a beast from the sea and a beast from the earth.

These beasts succeed in deceiving all those on the earth who are not sealed with the name of God through intimidation, manipulation or inspiration.

Then before the final judgment there is another pause – a brief glimpse of the all those who have been sealed standing in the presence of the Lamb who was slain – which reveals that these two beasts failed to deceive any who belong to the Lamb.

Then three angels appear to announce three aspects of the final judgment, first – that the final judgment will be based on whom you have feared and worshiped; second - that Babylon has fallen, and third – that terrible punishment awaits those who have been deceived by the beasts and have taken their mark.

And then John sees the final judgment occur in two stages; both playing upon the harvesting metaphor. First Christ gathers those who belong to him, then those who do not belong to Christ are destroyed.

So, once again we have observed the period of time between the first coming of Christ and His second coming, but this time we are able to see what has previously been unseen, the spiritual conflict that has led to the persecution of the church and individual believers.

And the purpose for showing this to us is to help us understand exactly why we experience persecution and opposition. It’s because Satan’s ultimate destruction is near

and He will use the little time He has left to attempt to destroy those who follow Christ, to take us down with Him.

Friends, I don't know if you've ever had the experience of discovering that someone has it out for you?

I have, and it is unnerving when you realize that you're not just dealing with a difficult person or a personality clash – but that you are dealing with someone who - no matter what you do to try and appease them - they've decided they are going to get rid of you.

That's how it is between us and the devil folks.

You see we might be tempted to believe that Christians are persecuted for purely political or religious reasons – e.g. because what they teach undermines the gov't's power, because the ethical ways they demand businesses conduct themselves will cut into the owners profits, because they offend people when they point out how ignorant and

foolishness it is to worship the creation instead of the creator...

And we might think that if we work hard at presenting ourselves as loving, humble and inoffensive people that we can avoid opposition and persecution, and this is partially true...

Paul does say *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* (Romans 12:18)

But friends – we need to be made aware that there are darker, more sinister forces at work fueling the opposition we experience in this time between times.

That in fact, the reason why gov'ts respond with violence or punitive action when their power is undermined is because it is the Devil's power that is being challenged.

Again – please don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that government and politics or business or culture or

education are somehow inherently evil – but what the 4th Vision reveals to us is that they become the front which the Devil hides behind in order to deceive individual believers so that they give him their loyalty without realizing it and then suffer the consequences for that.

This is the whole point of enlisting the help of the two beasts – they act as spiritual fronts for the devil. So, let's take a quick look at them shall we...

The first beast comes up out of the sea – a place where chaos and evil lurks in the depths, an image in scripture that often represents and is associated with the ungodly nations and the ungodly peoples of this world.

It is also a synthesis of the four beasts, the lion, leopard, bear and horned beast, which Daniel saw in his visions.

Now since these beasts in Daniel were explained to represent kings and their empires, and the beast in the 4th Vision emerges from the nations and peoples of this world – we can

understand that this beast and its seven heads and ten horns and crowns represents any and all national/political government organization in the time between times that the Devil empowers to deceiving and leading humanity astray.

This vision shows us the spiritual reality behind nationalism, empires, and political movements that look impressive and powerful and poised to conquer the world and bring in some sort of utopia. Such things might cause us to wonder if anything can really stand against them...

People see them and think “If you can't beat'em, might as well join'em” – except that we can see this monstrous power is really a terrible beast that blasphemes God – because it proclaims that its great power gives it the right to rule,

that there is no one that can stand against it – not even God can protect you from them, and it demands that you simply acquiesce to its power... if you don't it just rolls over you with its brute force.

And so to preserve our lives we might be tempted to go along with this beast – and we probably would... if it hadn't been revealed to us that the power behind this beast is Satanic.

To go along with this beast because we think it's better to "learn to bend with the wind or it knocks you down" is not wisdom – its actually giving your allegiance to the devil.

Think of how the "Christian" people of Germany were caught up in the Third Reich, of how Church leaders in Russia and China had to agree to support the anti-religious Communist government if they wanted to avoid persecution.

Look where it took them in the end...

However the first beast can only go so far – brute force and shock and awe only goes so far – some people just can't be intimidated, and if you confront them in this manner they will simply dig in their heels and resist you, so a more subtle approach is needed.

Not to mention, people need reasons to rationalize power and brute force and some end results which can justify the means in order for them to give their full support.

So - enter the second beast – which emerges out of the earth, the same earth which had opened up to swallow the torrent of water which the dragon had spewed out to drown the woman.

Now, since scripture identifies the devil as the father of lies (John 8:44), its appropriate to understand that this torrent of water as the devil's attempt to drown the early church in false teaching and heresy and so destroy the church – hence Jesus' warning to the church in the first vision about false teachers.

But that outright attempt failed – symbolized in the earth opening up to swallow that torrent of water.

So, now - in his efforts to attack individual believers Satan brings back all those lies and falsehoods from out of the earth this time in the form of a benign looking beast.

This second beast functions in a supportive role to the first beast, so that if you aren't deceived or intimidated into worshiping the power of the first beast you will be persuaded and convinced to do so by the lies and miracles or manipulations of the second beast.

So, this beast from the earth represents all the religions, the philosophies, the worldviews, the ideologies, the belief systems, which these ungodly national and political movements are based on.

And they make the blasphemy and abusive powers of these ungodly empires seem attractive, righteous, and what their leaders say to be unquestionable...

So people are deceived into believing it is right and good to follow and worship the beast, or they do so because they see no other way to obtain the necessities of life.

So now – we're ready to deal with the Apostle John's exhortation to us in 13:18 where he says *"This calls for*

wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666"

Now we all get the warning in this exhortation – be careful of beasts that look like lambs but talk like dragons! Stay away from them, don't listen to them, don't talk to them, and don't take candy from them, and above all don't let them give you a tattoo!

The challenge is figuring out which lambs are speaking like dragon. So to aid us in that exercise of discernment John gives us a number – 666; which helps us identify the beast.

But why do we need that? Didn't we just conclude that the two beasts are any and all ungodly governments and any and all ungodly belief systems in the time between times?

Yes we did – but that's precisely why we need an identifying mark because we need to determine what exactly "ungodly" is.

You see some people are convinced that “ungodly” means a one world government; or that it is the consolidation of power and authority, and so they are opposed to things like the United Nations, or big government.

Some people are convinced that “ungodly” means technological advances that enable more efficient means of buying and selling – like bar codes and debit cards.

But the scriptures show us that God intended for us to be stewards to develop things like technology and economics, – so these things can’t be the definition of “ungodly”

And the Kingdom of Heaven which is obviously Godly, will also be a one world government and it will also consolidate power and authority in one person, so that can’t be what “ungodly” means either.

Instead friends, what makes governments and belief systems “ungodly” is symbolized by the number 666. This is why it is the number of the beast.

Now this is not a riddle that we need to figure out – it’s a symbol that requires scriptural insight.

Starting with the simple observation that John tells us this number symbolizes humanity – He says “it is man’s number.”

From there scriptural insight will remember that humans, and animals – beasts, were created on the sixth day.

And scriptural insight will pick up on the threefold repetition of this number and think of the Triune God - the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And scriptural insight will recognize that repeating man’s number three times is a symbolic way of representing humanities efforts to take God’s place and isn’t that what Satan initially deceived Adam and Eve into doing when He had them eat from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

And scriptural insight will also recognize this number is a reference to the amount of gold that King Solomon received

as annual tribute from kings whom he ruled over. (1 Kings 10:14)

And scriptural insight will notice that the next chapter, 1 Kings 11 details how Solomon allowed his foreign wives to turn his heart away from worshipping God to worshipping Idols.

And so this number also symbolizes the subtle and seductive appeal which worshipping something other than God has for us – whether be it idols or ourselves.

Friends these are the marks of the beast, this is the number of the beast – it is man’s number, it is humanity seduced by the possibility of playing god – it is the voice of the dragon, that ancient serpent saying to us *“You will not die... when you eat from the tree your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*

So Friends, we must always be evaluating the belief systems and worldviews that our governments and societies and education systems are based on, watching for the number of

the beast so that we are not deceived, so that we are not lead astray to worship anything or anyone other than God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, there’s so much more I could say on this but our time is up this morning, so let me close off by reminding us that in spite of all the power and persuasiveness the two beasts have been given to deceive people – it is revealed to John that none of those who have been sealed by God have been lost.

So – friends be discerning, watch out for lambs that talk like dragons... but do not be fearful or worried that you will be deceived, and do not hide away from the world – instead trust in the fact that Christ has asked the Father not take us out of this world, but instead protect us from the evil one (John 17:15) and He has sealed us with His Holy Spirit who will lead us into all truth.

So be confident of this “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Phil 1:6) Amen!