

**WHAT ABOUT THE ANTICHRIST?****1 JOHN 2:18-22, 4:3; 2 JOHN 7;  
2 THESSALONIANS 2:1-12; REVELATION 13 & 17**

In our discipleship leadership group we sometimes talk about “hanging pictures.” In other words, we all have images or mental pictures of what that word “disciple” or “discipleship” means. Those images or mental pictures can be thought of as “hanging pictures.” When I say the word “Antichrist” what images come into your mind today? What pictures hang in your mind when I say “Antichrist”? I can still remember what pictures were hanging in my mind when I was a kid. Antichrist was an incredibly evil, satanic, sadistic, but very powerful, charismatic person who eventually ruled the entire planet and hated everything about Jesus and Christians. He was going to force everyone everywhere to get his mark on your forehead or right hand. That was called the mark of the beast. It was probably the number 666. If you didn’t get that number imprinted on your forehead or right hand, you would not be able to get a job, buy food, or provide for yourself. Not that you would have to for very long anyway, because refusing to get the mark of the beast was the quickest ticket to your own execution. I can still remember how I felt as an elementary aged kid when I woke up from a nap one afternoon to discover not one person in my family was in the house. I had no idea where everyone had gone. I was completely alone except for our pet cat. For a few agonizing moments, I wondered if the rapture had occurred and I had been left behind to hide from Antichrist as best I could. You want a definition of “relief”? That’s when a family member walks back in the house after you thought Jesus might have returned and you were left all alone against Antichrist. Whew!

We are about to take the last laps around the track in a message series I started back in April on the end times. It’s entitled “In The Last Days: What Does The Bible Say About The End Times?” As a part of that study, we want to take up the subject of Antichrist this morning. There’s hardly a more fascinating, controversial topic within a study on the end times than Antichrist. Is he the same as the Beast in Revelation? Is there more than one Antichrist? Is he an historical figure from the past or one who’s coming in the future? Is the Antichrist an actual person or is it more like a spirit or a movement or maybe a combination of both? Well, let’s get started by reminding ourselves of...

**WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT THE ANTICHRIST.**

The first place we should consider is the New Testament letters of 1 and 2 John where the word “Antichrist” actually appears. These were letters written by the Christian leader, John, to churches probably in the Roman province of Asia Minor – present day Turkey – sometime in the first century. This is the same John that wrote the book of Revelation. If you listen to some prophecy and end time specialists, you might get the impression that the Bible talks about the Antichrist on every other page! Nothing could be further from the truth. The actual word “Antichrist” only appears right here in 1 and 2 John. Let’s read those passages right now. We just read all the places in the Bible where the actual word “Antichrist” appears.

So what can we learn about the Antichrist from those passages? First, John seemed to regard the Antichrist more as a group of false prophets rather than just one person. Two, he was far more concerned about how Antichrist was manifested back then and there in the first century, than how Antichrist might show up sometime in the distant future. In fact, he doesn't associate the Antichrist with the end times at all. Three, John implies that this group of false teachers were at one point part of the Christian community, but that their hypocrisy had now been revealed. Four, John implies that Antichrist was an evil spiritual attitude that rejected key truths about Jesus. It involved denying that Jesus was ever a real, physical person. False prophets were saying that Jesus only appeared to be a human being. They refused to acknowledge that Jesus was God or was from God. They were dangerous deceivers and tools of Satan.

The next passage worthy of consideration is the "man of lawlessness" passage in 2 Thessalonians 2. Let's look at it together. You should know that this is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible to understand. It gives Bible scholars and interpreters headaches! St. Augustine, one of the greatest Christian intellects to have ever lived, made the following comment about the verses we just read, "I frankly confess I do not know what Paul means." Observe, also, that Paul never uses the word "Antichrist" to describe this person, so we are all making a leap of faith, in one sense, by concluding that it's the same person or entity that John referenced in his letters.

There are at least two schools of interpretation. One group believes that Paul was speaking about the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD. Paul wrote this letter in approximately 50 AD, so the temple's destruction was future for him but past for us reading it today. In this scenario, the man of lawlessness was probably someone associated with that incredible, terrible event like the Roman emperor. The biggest problem with that view, however, is that Paul clearly seems to be talking about the second coming of Jesus here. He says, "Now, dear brothers and sisters, let us clarify some things about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and how we will be gathered to meet him. Don't be so easily shaken or alarmed by those who say that the day of the Lord has already begun..." (2 Th 2:1-2 NLT) The other group of interpreters say, then, that Paul was describing a person who would be revealed shortly before the second coming of Jesus. That's certainly possible, but then you have to explain phrases that suggest Paul was thinking about what was happening to him then and there in the first century. For instance, he says, "this lawlessness is already at work secretly, and it will remain secret until the one who is holding it back steps out of the way." (2 Th 2:7 NLT) There's all sorts of speculation as to who or what is holding back or restraining this man of lawlessness. Like I said, it's a tough passage to interpret.

Be that as it may, what can we learn about the Antichrist here assuming that he is one and the same as this "man of lawlessness"? By using the word "lawless", Paul is saying that he or it totally rejects God's authority. This person or entity encourages and invites human beings to worship him or it as if he or it was God. Clearly, he or it thinks of itself as superior to God and to Jesus. Like John, Paul says this person or entity will be a master deceiver. "This man will come to do the work of Satan with counterfeit power and signs and miracles. He will use every kind of evil deception to fool those on their

way to destruction..." (2 Th 2:9-10 NLT) One thing is very certain from this passage. Whenever or however it will happen, Jesus will one day utterly destroy or overthrow this manifestation of the Antichrist. "Then the man of lawlessness will be revealed, but the Lord Jesus will kill him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by the splendor of his coming." (2 Th 2:8 NLT)

Well, that brings us now to a third group of passages in the book of Revelation where the Antichrist is identified as "the Beast." Most of that material is in chapters 13 and 17 and we don't have time to read all the passages where the Beast (or Beasts actually) appear. But, remember, that the same man – John – who is the only biblical author to use the actual word "Antichrist" in his letters, made a deliberate decision not to refer to the Beast as the Antichrist here in Revelation. The word Antichrist never appears in the book of Revelation! So, equating Antichrist with the Beast is, at one level, a leap of faith. Is it a reasonable assumption? I believe so, but it's still an assumption.

How we interpret who or what Antichrist was or is depends a great deal on how we interpret the book of Revelation itself. I had a message about that way back in April. I'm sure you remember every word, too! I stated then that the book of Revelation is an example of a kind of literature known as apocalypse that flourished for about 400 years (between 200 BC and 200 AD). Among other characteristics, apocalyptic writings were full of Old Testament images and symbols. Some of those images are borrowed and made to mean something else. Apocalypses are full of symbolic imagery. John used powerful - sometimes incredible or fantastic symbols or pictures - to convey very real truths about historical or literal events. That was his intent. Don't ever make the mistake of equating writing that is highly symbolic in the Bible with things that aren't real or historical. It's a mistake to try and interpret the book of Revelation literally, because it was never John's intent that you understand what he wrote there literally. When you try to interpret Revelation literally, you will miss its real, intended meaning.

That principle could not be more true than right at the beginning of chapter 13! "Then I saw a beast rising up out of the sea. It had seven heads and ten horns, with ten crowns on its horns. And written on each head were names that blasphemed God. This beast looked like a leopard, but it had the feet of a bear and the mouth of a lion! And the dragon gave the beast his own power and throne and great authority." (Rev 13:1-2 NLT) If you insist on interpreting Revelation literally, good luck! So, my friends, for what it's worth, here's how I see it. John was trying to describe what he saw as the ultimate adversary in this world of God and His people. He gave it a name: the Beast. Yes, in one sense that's the Devil, who is depicted as a dragon in Revelation. But Satan likes to work through persons and people instead of doing anything directly. Those outward manifestations of Satan's efforts were, collectively, the Beast.

John was beginning to see manifestations of Satan's work right back there in the first century and its effect on the very first followers of Jesus - those Christians in those seven churches in Asia Minor that were the principal recipients of the book of Revelation. He wanted to educate them as to what was happening: what Satan was up to and what God was up to. He also wanted to encourage them. The Roman Empire

controlled their lives. The Roman emperors were making lots of noise about how they were in fact gods worthy of worship. It was increasingly suggested that if you were loyal to Rome, you should worship the emperor as a god. All kinds of pressure was starting to be put on Christians in the first century to recognize the current emperor's deity. If you wanted to get ahead in life, if you wanted economic stability for your family, if you wanted your business to flourish, you could just burn a little incense to Caesar at some pagan temple. What was the big deal? You could still worship Jesus, too! Persecution of Christians had begun. Followers of Jesus had been killed for their faith. There was pressure to compromise your faith, to be a Christian, but do a little emperor worship on the side. I can only imagine that some of those first Christians were raising questions: "Wait just a minute now. You say Jesus defeated Satan at the cross and the empty tomb, right? So, when do we actually get to see this 'victory'? It looks like to us that Rome has even more power now. It looks like the Roman emperors are becoming even more evil and corrupt. Our brother and sisters in Jesus are being persecuted and killed. Is it really worth it to follow Jesus?"

Who was the Beast, or how was the Beast manifested, back in the first century? Frankly, a very good choice is the Roman Emperor Nero who reigned from 54 – 68 AD. The first seven to eight years of his reign were actually quite good and productive. But it started to go downhill in the early 60s. Nero became a vicious, sadistic dictator. He killed his own mother because he felt his power was threatened. A terrible fire in 64 destroyed much of Rome. Because he was unable to quell the rumors that he himself caused the fire, Nero made the emerging Christian community in Rome the scapegoat for the fire. Christians were terribly persecuted and viciously killed. Most scholars believe that both Christian leaders, Peter and Paul, were executed at Nero's command. John's depiction of the Beast as someone or something that was the incarnation of evil, which opposed God, that persecuted Christians certainly fit Nero. Nero thankfully killed himself in 68, but rumors persisted for decades that he was still alive and would return to reclaim the throne. Perhaps John's depiction of the Beast as someone who suffered a mortal wound but then recovered was based on that legend of Nero's return. Nero was even referred to or called "a beast" by Roman historians. Might John have borrowed a well-known designation – "the beast" - for this despised ruler?

Yet another fascinating reason to believe Nero was the original Beast is the number 666. John writes, "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." (Rev 13:18 NIV) This is an example of a very common practice in the ancient world called "gematria." It meant assigning a numerical value to letters of either the Hebrew, Greek, or Latin alphabets and use them as a kind of code. John assumes here that his readers would be able to figure out who he meant by 666. John and many of the first Christians in the province of Asia Minor were Jewish Christians who knew and read Hebrew. Interestingly, it's been discovered that when you apply gematria to the Hebrew words "Neron Kazar" or "Nero Caesar" you end up with 666. Here's how it works if you convert the Hebrew letters into English: N = 50; R = 200; O = 6; N = 50; C = 100; S = 60; R = 200 = 666. Additionally, when you apply gematria to the Greek word for "beast" it also comes out to 666. Is that definitive proof Nero was the Beast? No, but it's very

possible indeed that was who John had in mind. Other interpreters, by the way, think 666 is symbolic for “complete incompleteness” since the number 777 is the symbolic number for “complete completeness” or divine perfection.

Regardless, I’m convinced that John saw Nero as a kind of prototype of what Antichrist and the spirit of Antichrist was going to look like not only in the first century but for all of human history between the first and second comings of Jesus. What’s a prototype? It’s the original or model on which something else is based or formed. Nero provided a very fitting canvas on which John could paint both the character and the actions of the Beast’s attempts to defeat God. In John’s day and time, the Beast was Rome, generally, and probably Nero, specifically. In subsequent centuries, it is any and all individual and collective attempts to oppose Jesus and the spreading influence of the Kingdom of God around the planet. In other words, Christians now and Christians back then, this is the way things were, are, and will be until Jesus returns. Get used to it. As I’ve read and studied these passages and read and studied what people say about them, let me share with you...

### **SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE ANTICHRIST.**

Here’s my first conclusion. We cannot be dogmatic about the concept or the doctrine of the Antichrist from the Bible itself. If someone suggests to you that there’s only just one right understanding of who the Antichrist is, when he will appear, and what he will do, run away from them as fast as you can! People like that – even if they’ve written a book, developed a website, and produced a DVD need to learn some humility! Here’s a second conclusion. Antichrist appears to be more about an organized force of evil between the first and second comings of Jesus that opposes Jesus and the Kingdom of God than just one historical person either in the past or in the future. Yes, it could be one person either in the past or in the future, but I believe the Bible’s picture of the Antichrist is bigger. Here’s a great quote that kind of brought Antichrist into perspective for me. “The beast is a trans-cultural, trans-temporal symbol for all individual and collective, Satanically-inspired, opposition to Jesus and his people. It is anything and everything (whether a principle, a person, or a power) utilized by the enemy to deceive and destroy the influence and advance of the kingdom of God.” (Sam Storms)

Christians today who believe Revelation is only about the future – about things that haven’t happened yet – I believe miss out on what it meant for the people to whom it was written. I particularly disagree with my dispensational friends who want us to believe that all of what John tells us about the Beast is fulfilled in some future Great Tribulation lasting for only seven years. I believe that what John saw has application not only to the first century but for all Christians between the entire time period that will take place between the first and second comings of Jesus. In other words, John is implying that followers of Jesus in every century and in every culture are going to witness different but real manifestations of the Beast until Jesus returns.

For centuries Christians have tried to identify Antichrist with specific human beings: different Roman emperors, the Roman Catholic pope, Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini,

Josef Stalin, Henry Kissinger, and even Ronald Reagan – just to name a few. To some extent it's been used by one group to attack the integrity of another group. When Christians do this, we all end up looking pretty dumb. In one sense, it's probably right to see outright, clearly evil people as a manifestation of Antichrist. But I believe that's too limiting. Antichrist can also show up in godless philosophies and cultural movements. How about secular, evolutionary Darwinism? How about slavery and institutional racism? How about Marxism and communism? How about Roe v. Wade? How about state persecution of Christians in China? How about radical Islamic fundamentalism? How about the current redefinition of marriage happening in our own country and culture? Each of these could well be manifestations of the Beast – anything and everything that opposes God, refuses to acknowledge the authority of His Word, refuses to acknowledge the centrality of Jesus, and which persecutes God's people in some way, shape or form.

If you agree with me about that second conclusion, then a third conclusion logically follows. Antichrist is right here right now and must be resisted and rejected by followers of Jesus. I'm not thinking of a specific person, but instead of anything and everything that opposes God. Antichrist probably looks different in different places. In Iraq and Syria the Beast might well be incarnated today in ISIS and radical Islamic fundamentalism. I believe that for American Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Beast most often reveals itself as the pressure of a godless culture around us. It's a kind of pressure to conform to living life as if God doesn't exist, that Jesus is unimportant, and that God's Word doesn't matter. It's more like an evil, deceiving spirit or attitude that's constantly after us to compromise our faith and to buy into what our culture says is important and matters. It's always tempting us to push Jesus to the margins of our lives instead of keeping Him front and center every day. By the way, that's what I believe is the real meaning of the "mark of the Beast" John mentions in Revelation 13. It's not the literal number 666 printed on your body or a computer chip implanted in your forehead. Instead, it was a symbolic way of describing the loyalty of the Beast's followers and its ownership of them. Brothers and sisters, John saw compromise and accommodation with the Beast – with Rome, with emperor worship - among his friends back in those seven churches in Asia Minor. How about you and how about me? Where are you and I tempted today to compromise with the Beast?

A final conclusion and it's the best one of all. At Jesus' second coming, whoever the Beast is or whatever form it takes will be destroyed. That is beyond any doubt! Just a few verses from Revelation 19. "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.... On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.... Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf.... The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur." (Rev 19:11-13, 16, 19-20 NIV) Satan is going to continue to

work through his agents throughout history. Those different manifestations of the Beast will come and go, rise and fall, until Jesus returns. But they will not succeed. God will have the last word. Jesus' victory at the cross and the empty tomb was decisive and God's victory at the end of time will be final. Thanks be to God!

It was a Mission Sunday when missionaries on furlough bring special reports in place of a sermon. The couple on that day were missionaries stationed in what appeared to be a particularly steamy jungle. They gave a full report on churches planted or commitments made or translations begun. But what was really memorable was a story they shared about a snake. One day an enormous —much longer than a man—slithered its way right through their front door and into the kitchen of their simple home. Terrified, they ran outside and searched frantically for a local who might know what to do. A machete-wielding neighbor came to the rescue, calmly marching into their house and decapitating the snake with one clean chop. The neighbor reemerged triumphant and assured the missionaries that the reptile had been defeated. But there was a catch, he warned: It was going to take a while for the snake to realize it was dead.

A snake's neurology and blood flow are such that it can take considerable time for it to stop moving even after decapitation. For the next several hours, the missionaries were forced to wait outside while the snake thrashed about, smashing furniture and flailing against walls and windows, wreaking havoc until its body finally understood that it no longer had a head. Sweating in the heat, they were frustrated but also grateful that the snake's rampage wouldn't last forever. At some point in their waiting, they had a mutual epiphany. "Do you see it?" asked the husband. "Satan is a lot like that big old snake. He's already been defeated. He just doesn't know it yet. In the meantime, he's going to do some damage. But never forget that he's a goner."

That's an accurate picture of the universe. We're in the thrashing time when Satan and Antichrist – whatever or whoever he or it actually is or does – is flailing around causing a whole lot of damage. The temptation is to despair. But it won't last forever. Jesus has already crushed the serpent's head. Total, final victory is just ahead.