

The Price Tag on Standing Up

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[0:00] So on the night before Dr. King was slain in 1968, he took a stand behind a podium for the last time in Memphis, Tennessee.

! Who in here knows what King was in Memphis for? Anybody? Sanitation workers strike, yeah, for sure.

! So King was standing in solidarity with the sanitation workers in Memphis as a part of his poor people's life. Another sign of his continually expanding ideologies and practices for the proletariat, the working class, the marginalized worldwide.

And the threats on King's life in the season had done nothing but increase. The threats on the movement, the civil rights movement, had continually experienced greater oppression.

Yes, there were some marks of progress and things that they had made, but they were continuing to experience an expanding level of threats. Even the plane that King came to Memphis on had to be watched overnight and they delayed it so they could check every part of it so that nothing would happen to anyone, that this plane wouldn't be booby-trapped.

[1:17] But his hunger for justice, his hunger for deepening inclusion for the rights of people, right?

From the sanitation workers, to the civil rights of black people, to the criticism of the Vietnam War. King's hunger for justice was expanding in the face of greater beasts of injustice.

See, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King knew full well that the price of standing up for what's right is often suffering, but you gain life.

And while standing aside or against it may bring security, the price is your soul. So what's up with y'all? My name is Trevor Wendt. If you don't know me, my pronouns are he, him, and I'm on the preaching team here at the Table Church.

And I'm continuing our series, Reading Revelation for Resistance, Dissident Discipleship in an Unjust World. Where one of our main goals of this series is to guide this congregation in understanding that Revelation is not just a book about, or is not some book about decoding the future, but it's rather a book about discerning the present.

[2:38] Its hope is to guide us in resisting oppressive powers of this world and proclaiming freedom to the marginalized and the oppressed.

So if you're taking notes today in rare form, I have a title for my message, folks. The title of my message is, How Much a Dollar Cost? Word to Kendrick Lamar.

Now that is not the subheading, but you can write it in your notes if you'd like. So if you have a Bible, you know, digital, physical, slide to Revelation 12, 18.

We're going to be spending our time mostly a day in 13, but we've got to start in 12, 18. And no worries, if not, it's going to be on the screen over here. So we're going to break this thing down today into three main sections.

We're going to break it down into the two beasts. Then we're going to go into the mark of the beast, a term that many of you may be familiar with. And then we're going to end on the mountaintop.

[3:45] So let's get it. Revelation 12, 18. We're going to do this first section. We're going to break this down into these two sections in Scripture.

Revelation 12, 18, 13, 1 through 10. Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. And I saw the beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads.

And on its horns were ten diadems. And on its heads were blasphemous names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard. Its feet were like a bear's. Its mouth was like a lion's.

And the dragon gave his power and his throne in great authority. One of its head seemed to have received a death blow. But its mortal wound had been healed.

In amazement, the whole earth followed the beast. They worshiped the dragon. For he had given his authority to the beast. And they worshiped the beast saying, Who is like the beast?

[4:45] Who can fight against it? The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words. And it was allowed to exercise authority for 42 months.

It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God. Blaspheming his name and his dwelling. That is, those who dwell in heaven. Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nations. And all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it. Everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world and the book of life of the lamb that was slaughtered.

Let anyone who has an ear listen. If you are to be taken captive into captivity, you go. If you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed.

Here is a call for the endurance and the faith of the saints. Let's pray. God, may you stir our hearts.

[5:50] Stir our hearts for justice for the oppressed. Give us the courage to take courageous risks and to stand firm in the midst of suffering, in the midst of trials.

Give us hope that lives out on earth as it is in heaven. Amen. All right, y'all. So in chapter 12, we see this dragon, right?

We see this first beast sort of situation. But at the beginning of it, we see this dragon who is identified in Revelation as Satan, the devil, the accuser. This sort of idea of a big picture evil in the world standing against the work of God, trying to take out Jesus and kill him and defeat him.

This isn't some sort of concept of some horned devil or like him from the Powerpuff Girls or something like that, right? But this is this concept of this active evil working against the works of God.

And see, that was a bad idea because Buddy got powerbombed to earth. If you don't know what a powerbomb is, it's this big old wrestling move, professional wrestling move. You put a person on your shoulders, lift them up, boom, thrown to earth.

[7:04] Bam. So the dragon is feeling a type of way. I mean, I personally would feel a type of way if I got powerbombed from heaven to earth. But, you know, this is a dragon. It's out here for evil, right?

And so it can't defeat Jesus. So it says, all right, well, if I can't defeat Jesus, I'm gonna go after the people. And we see why instantly.

Immediately as chapter 13 begins, we see this beast rising out of the water. And it's described as this bugged out looking joint with ten horns and seven heads.

And its horns have these ten deodems on its head. It's got these names that are blaspheming God. And it looked like a leopard and a bear, mouth like a lion, all sorts of stuff. It is a creepy looking chimera joint.

It is wrong. But there's purpose in this. See, the descriptions of this beast is actually an allusion or a connection to the book of Daniel in the Old Testament.

[8 : 11] And there are these separate beasts that look like this combination of this beast that we see here. And in Daniel, it represents these kings and rulers and empires, right?

And so what we see from the combination of this beast in the book of Revelation is this thought that this is super evil. This is empire, empire.

This is the Death Star, Death Star for my Star Wars fans out there. See, beast number one is about power.

Imperial power. Oppressive power. And the first hearers of this joint, the homies back then, the early church, they would have connected this easily to the Roman Empire.

See, but the depiction of the super evil is also a broader idea as well for audiences throughout the ages to recognize these beasts of the sea in our own timelines.

[9 : 21] So how do we do that? Where are the connection points that we have? Well, the description, this imagery that we see of this beast, we hear that it resembles the dragon.

One might even call it a Mago dragon, made in the image and the likeness of the dragon. It does dragon things, y'all.

Notice that verse two says, and the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. The dragon gives the power to the beast, to the empire.

To these evils. See, the dragon is in control. And I'm not talking about some sort of Satan or demonic oppression or not oppression, but possession.

I mean, it is oppression, too. But the possessing of someone, right? See, because the allure of power, the allure of blood money and oppression is enough.

[10 : 25] It don't need to possess these rulers, these systems, these evils. So when we see companies profiting off of genocide in Congo or Sudan or Gaza, the beast of the sea is at work.

When we see Saudi Arabia murder a citizen for speaking up against injustice, the beast of the sea is at work. When we see massed ICE agents brutalize and fracture families in our communities and communities across this country, the beast of the sea is at work.

See, when imperial power is being wielded to oppress the people, the beast of the sea is at work.

Pastor and theologian Scott McKnight says it well. Dissident disciples should learn or should discern the dragon behind the wild things of every age, including our own day.

We're not looking for figures by predicting specific persons in the future. Rather, we are looking for images of dragon like leaders and work in all societies and all times.

[11 : 44] They are puppets whose strings are pulled by the dragon. Remember, these images are not about predicting the future, but about shaping our perceptions of the present.

See, this imagery helps us to recognize who these dragons are throughout the ages. But it also helps us to communicate or helps to communicate to us that this power is fugazi.

It's fake. It's masquerading as God. It's holding the same power as Jesus. See, the passage talks about this death blow that this thing had had seemed to receive in one of its heads, which was which is the same word that we see in Greek for the term slain.

That same slain that is used for the lamb who represents Jesus who was resurrected. See, this is this is some sort of false resurrection. This false masquerading of Jesus.

The beast is front. The beast is found. The beast is found. And it's got folks caught up. In fear. In fear. And mad folks are second guessing. The temptation to run and to hide, to fight sword with sword or to submit, to worship the beast and the dragon gets realer and realer and realer.

[13:13] The stakes are high. But John reminds us to endure. At the end of that passage, I want to run back to that real quick.

It says, let anyone who has an ear listen. If you are to be taken captive into captivity, you go. If you kill with the sword, with the sword, you must be killed. Here is the call for endurance and faith of the saints.

We must endure. Because the price of standing up for what's right is often suffering, but you gain life. And while standing aside or against it may bring security, the price is your soul.

And if the Roman or the imperial regime, not just the Roman Empire, but this concept of a greater evil, this greater imperial regime wasn't enough.

We're faced with the second beast. So back to the scripture, y'all. Revelation 13, 11 through 18. This is the second section we're going to rock through.

[14:23] Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all authority of the first beast on its behalf.

And it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast whose mortal wound had been healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all.

And by the signs that is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of the earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived.

And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. 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.

So that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark that is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast for it is a number or the number of a person.

[15:43] Its number is 666. So we see the second beast come out of this joint from the ground, right? We see this this this beast come out from the ground, rise from the ground.

And some scholars think that this is the sort of implication of a rising or gradual power and influence that rises up. Right. I also tend to think that this could be a loose connection to Adam, the first man, the first being formed out of the earth. Right.

And the second beast. Right. It looks like a lamb, but it speaks like a dragon. So we are back on this full gaze, fake Jesus energy. Right.

It looks like Jesus, but it sounds like Satan. I know that must connect to somebody, some system. Come on. So it's lying and it's putting up this front that the beast of the sea is all power.

It's performing false signs and wonders. It even has this power to bring fire, rain fire from from heaven to earth. Right. This is a connection to the Old Testament where people were designated as as messengers of God, like Elijah calling down fire from heaven.

[17:03] Right. Again, an act to say in some way that it is a false Jesus, a false messenger, a false prophet. It's fake in the power.

And it's trying to get folks to bow down to the powers that be, even to the point of murdering them if they don't. Jesus warns us about cats like this.

And Matthew seven, he talks about these false prophets who he describes as wolves in sheep's clothing. See, they're they're aiming to to dominate, to rule by fear and death and thievery and destruction.

Now, in the age for these folks, these first hearers. Right. These folks would have connected this imagery to things like the Roman imperial court or cult rather.

And the Roman imperial cult was this this sort of religious order that that communicated that the emperors and their families were descendants of the divine.

[18:10] They were little gods. Now, you should worship them. This would have connected also to other other leaders and and communications about false prophets that we see in other parts of the New Testament, like Paul calling out the Judaizers.

Other false faiths, other false gospels. For us, this can connect to things like prosperity gospel. Right.

This robbing of the poor, that God wants you to be rich while while you stay poor and I fly in the Bugatti of the sky.

This is a true story. I will not call out this person. Or Christian nationalism, right? This allegiance to racism and violence and domination that is somehow in Jesus's name coded in the U.S. American flag.

Maybe even the KKK. Maybe even the KKK. Maybe even the KKK. White hoods terrorizing any person of color, especially black folks, somehow in the name of God, in the name of Jesus.

[19:31] See, because beast number one is about power. Beast number two is about propaganda. But remember that this power and this propaganda are fake.

They're imitations. And they're not going to last. They stand on nothing. God, it makes me think about this first beast that takes or this dragon that takes its footing on sand.

It's not solid ground. Jesus gave us a parable about that. Build your house upon the rock.

Not sand. These are all poor attempts to derail the work of Jesus. But the faithful saints must endure. We must remember that the price of standing up for what's right is often suffering.

But you gain life. And while standing aside or against it may bring this false sense of security, the price is your soul. Next we see this effort from the beast to put this mark on people's foreheads or the right hand.

[20:56] We hear about in verse 16. It says, It also causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have this mark.

That is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person and its number is 666.

So we hear about this mark of the beast, right? We see it's, you're putting the mark on either the forehead or the hand. You can see the forehead, think mind, body, and spirit, total domination of a being.

And this right hand could have potentially symbolized commerce, interaction, socioeconomic, you know, ability to move freely. If you grew up like me, you might have thought that this was some sort of literal mark, some barcode or chip that signified some sort of selling out yourself to serve the devil, putting 666 on you in some sort of way.

Now, this ain't that type of sermon, that this mark of the beast is going to be a fast ticket to hell. You need to watch out for your checkout totals. You need to watch out for your, you know, receipts at the local Chinese food spot.

[22 : 28] It's not that type of sermon. But there is, there is this, this sort of connection in this thing to the sort of dancing with the devil, to submitting yourself to the service of the powers of evil, this world, this, this selling out type of energy.

That number 666 is likely a reference to complete imperfection. It's a symbol that is about embracing the worst of humanity.

In contrast with 777, which biblically represents complete perfection or holiness. On top of that, the number is, is actually getting at naming a figure in history through this joint that we would call gematria.

I have no clue if I said that right. Gematria. They did not teach me that in seminary. But so there were no numbers in Greek, so letters were used for both numbers and words.

So think of Roman numerals, for example. Like we know that 5 in Roman numerals is? Uh-huh. And then we know that 10 in Roman numerals is? Thank God for the Super Bowl, I guess, in that sort of way.

[23 : 43] Keeping Roman numerals in our vocabulary. But it says that deciphering these numbers takes wisdom, means it takes imagination. So we have to see and try to figure out what this sort of thing meant for John and its readers.

So the likely translation of what that 666 was calling to, when we break down what those, that sort of numbers represented in gematria, is Neron Kaiser or Nero Caesar.

Caesar. See, John was in code calling out Caesar himself, but this thing is bigger than Caesar. See, Caesar is a tool to call out the greater evil of empire, of domination, of the work of the dragon, embodying this sort of propaganda machine for this second beast.

Now, for the people of this day, there's no direct comparison of what this mark of the beast was. You know, it couldn't be something as easy as using coins that had Caesar's face on it, because, you know, we see other places in the Bible where Jesus is like, render to Caesar what is Caesar, render to God what is God.

But what it would probably symbolize is something like how if you ain't sell out to Rome, you're going to endure some stuff. Maybe trade restrictions, maybe barriers to social belonging, maybe boycotts of their businesses potentially.

[25 : 14] But the lack of direct correlation to what this mark actually was, I find intentional. Because the mark of the beast is a greater symbol to help us to understand, to imagine, to identify these marks of the beast in our own societies.

In some ages, it was a swastika. In some, it was a key in a row. These letters in the Greek alphabet that formed the Pax Romana symbol that was used by the Roman Emperor Constantine in his imperial warfare.

We're supposed to represent Christ. In recent times, it could have been that clanhood we talked about. And for many communities in our world, it's the U.S. American flag.

See, the symbol helps us to understand that we are not struggling for justice against an individual figure. No, no, no. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers.

These are systems. These are structures. These are regimes. And it costs something to resist the mark of the beast. For us today, it could be comparisons like, bow down to this ruler, or you finna catch a tariff.

[26 : 43] Kiss our flag while we have you hostage, or we gonna torture you some more. We gonna humiliate you some more. Or something like the assassination of Congolese President Patrice Lumumba by the CIA, who tried to take control of Congo's resources.

Tried to protect that country. And we see the state that the West has placed them in now. Or something like the assassination of Fred Hampton of the Black Panther Party, who was moving toward and creating this rainbow coalition.

This coalition of working class peoples across ethnicities and nationalities and races and uniting these different resistance groups. And saying, we have more in common together than we have a part, than we have separate.

And our power is stronger together. And the CIA and the Chicago PD assassinated him. It costs something to resist the mark of the beast. I mean, we're seeing it in our community right here, right now, right?

As pastors Heidi Toneta and Anthony announced the closure of the downtown service on Friday, due to the financial crisis that this church is walking through right now.

[28:09] And the evening service has been a home for the table for nearly a decade. I know many people in this building and online are grieving that. For many of you, it was your first introduction to the table, as it was mine.

And it's heartbreaking. It feels like it could be so much easier to be stable financially if we got up here and preached an exclusive gospel to the LGBTQ plus community, right?

If we preached a financially coercive gospel that God wants you to be rich, while we get on that Bugatti of the sky. Aware of fancy conflicts.

If we bowed down to the powers of the imperial regime through Christian nationalism. If we stoked fear and hatred and division and followed in the way of the dragon, it feels like it could be so much easier.

If we just accepted the mark of the beast. But we move forward despite loss and hardship and budget cuts and unemployment and salary cuts because we have chosen the way of the lamb.

[29:33] Because the price of standing up for what's right is often suffering. But you gain life. And while standing aside or against it may bring security, the price is your soul.

What shall a person profit if they gain the whole world and lose their soul? So grieve the loss today, church. But grieve and well done.

And grieve and keep going. I know moments like this seem bleak, y'all. Everywhere you look, it seems like the beasts are winning.

They got the sea and the ground. I told Anthony last week that a low key got me shook how many people are out here selling their souls for whatever cost it might be.

But John and the early church remind us that we are not alone. That they understood this and more as they face persecution and exile and martyrdom and oppression.

[30:41] And if we peek in chapter 14, we get a glimpse of this. Where in the first verse it says, Then I looked and there was a lamb standing on Mount Zion.

And this brings me to my final section, y'all. The mountaintop. In moments like these, right? When fear and worry seek to take hold of us.

Where the beast feels as if it is one. Remember that this entire narrative that we just walked through comes after its defeat. It was thrown down to earth.

This is an act of desperation. And the fear that it aims to stoke wants to avert your eyes from the power of the people united. It wants you to ask yourself, what will happen to me if I don't bow down rather than what will happen to my neighbor if I don't stand up?

And the last speech given by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King called I've Been to the Mountaintop. And he says that if God gave him the chance to live in any point of history, that he would traverse all these major moments in history.

[32:00] The Exodus. Plato and Aristotle's days. Martin Luther pinning his 95 thesis to the door of the Catholic Church. But he goes on to say that if God would just grant him a few years to live in the age that he's living in the second half of the 20th century, that he'd want to do that.

That sounds bugged out, right? Y'all know what age this man lived in? He said he wanted to do that. He said it sounded strange, right? All the black folk were suffering in that time.

How sick the nation and the world were. But he says, he says this. This joint is so profound to me. But I know somehow that only when it's dark enough can you see the stars.

Come on, somebody. And he says that the masses of people are rising up across the world from Jackson to Johannesburg, from Georgia to Gaza, from D.C. to D.R.

Congo, from Hawaii to Haiti. And the cry is always the same. We want to be free. And he said he was happy to live in this point in history because the circumstances forced them to grapple with the problems that the world had been trying to solve throughout history, but didn't demand, didn't force them to deal with them.

[33 : 35] But now survival demands it. I know that feels relevant. Church, I know the world feels dark right now. I know people in here have been risking their bodies protesting injustice, that people have been fired and lost their financial securities and they're in dire straits.

I know that this church is suffering financially and the evening service members just lost a weekly home. I know that we're all one or one degree or less separated from a family that has has been fractured by these these oppressions of ice.

The world is dark and we have to acknowledge it and we have to grieve it. But we have to remember that the light of the world has illuminated each and every one of his people and we saw we shine in the darkness.

And the darkness has not overcome it. It has not overcome us. I can't promise you that you won't be jailed for standing up for justice. I cannot promise you that you won't be deported.

I cannot promise you that you won't lose jobs or opportunities. I cannot promise you security or comfort. I cannot promise you that we won't lose a service like we just did. I cannot promise you your life.

[34 : 53] But what I can promise you is that when you look back on your life on this earth, that you will see fullness of life. That you will see fruits of the spirit. That you will see love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

I can promise you. I can promise you that you will leave seeds that are worth harvesting for generations to come to cultivate a better tomorrow for us as a people for us.

See, we stand for justice, not because of some promise of comfort or security or monetary benefit. No, we stand for justice because we believe that everyone is made in the image and the likeness of God.

Everyone deserves dignity. Everyone deserves purpose. Everyone deserves life and life abundantly. Because we believe in bringing heaven down.

In a new Jerusalem. In a new D.C. In a new New York. In a new Haiti. In a new Philippines. In a new Palestine.

[36 : 07] A world free from oppression. And filled with the dignity of all peoples. To echo Dr. King in his final speech.

I don't know what will happen now. I know we've got some difficult days ahead. But I'm not concerned about that now. Because I've been to the mountaintop.

Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place.

But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land.

I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that today. This morning. That we as a people. Will get to the promised land. That is our hope.

[37:06] That is our stand. That there is no height. No depth. No thing present. No thing to come. No principality. Or power. Or ruler. Or regime.

Or empire. No beast. That can separate you from the love. And the purpose of God. So we endure.

We endure in the midst of suffering. We endure in the midst of heartache. And pain. And grief. And loss. And fear.

And uncertainty. We endure. We are not the first. And we may not be the last. But these beasts will never win.

Because the price of standing up for what's right. Is often suffering. But you gain life. And while standing aside or against it.

[38:06] May bring security. The price. Is your soul. Amen.