

Bible Studies for Life Series for July 13: What about the Antichrist?

July 2, 2008

- Revelation 13:1-10,16-18

This week's lesson presents many difficult angles for the teacher—Revelation clearly is a coded book referencing many of the political and religious persecution problems of John's day. This week's passage focuses on an evil beast, frequently called the Antichrist by some interpreters, who rises from the seas and is followed by the whole earth.

While its cryptic nature makes it hard to follow, this passage has major implications for the way we live today, and in particular what leaders we choose to follow. Our own lifetimes have seen the rise of men like Hitler and bin Laden, so we are left to ponder if perhaps they are also examples of the idea of Antichrist?

Satan's PR man (Revelation 13:1-6)

Whether you read the beast as the Antichrist is irrelevant. This passage clearly indicates that there is someone or something—a beast—that is a tool of the dragon, and the dragon is thought to be the evil one we refer to as Satan. The dictate for modern readers is to be careful in choosing whom we may be following, and to be careful about joining in "just because everyone else is doing it."

We should reject any leader or teaching that lessens the sovereignty,

holiness and majesty of Christ. Ask your learners to discuss how they evaluate the quality of a leader, such as a pastor. In particular, how should followers of Christ evaluate the preaching and teaching to which they expose themselves?

The ultimate control freak (Revelation 13:7-8,16-18)

The first beast will exercise such authority that the whole world will follow him. This beast is given authority to make war, and it also is given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. In John's vision all the people of the world (except those written in the Lamb's book of life) worship the beast.

John then identifies a second beast (vv. 11-12), later called the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), who will require people to receive the mark of the beast in order to live or do business. Clarify for your learners that there are two beasts in chapter 13, and the mark of the beast refers to the first of the two beasts—the one commonly referred to as the Antichrist.

Gematria is the practice of assigning numbers to letters, a practice used by many to determine the significance of the number 666. There are scads of opinions about the significance of the number, with much speculation as to whom it could refer. The most probable is Neron Caesar according to the editors of the New Revised Standard Version, but the biblical truth for our lives is that John's words in verse 18 call for divine wisdom and not mathematical ingenuity.

After all, others have thought that Hitler, bin Laden and Ronald Reagan were the Antichrist, too.

The persecutor (Revelation 13:7, 9-10)

In John's vision, the beast was a source of suffering for followers of Christ, persecuting and killing believers. The harsh reality is that the evil forces at work in this world do intend to cause harm to God's children, and this reality forces us to heed the call for patient endurance and faithfulness from those who suffer persecution.

If you feel the sense of dread and doom in this passage, that's what John intended. He is partially quoting from Jeremiah 15, a passage his contemporary readers would know well as a word of doom from God. Yet there is a word of grace in this section of material, as it also is a partial quote from Matt 26:52.

There, Jesus is being captured in the garden and tells one of his disciples to put away his sword, "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." It is John's way of saying that believers must deal with the persecution in the manner of Jesus, not returning bad for bad, but instead choosing the peaceful way of Jesus as their ethical framework.

Exercising this endurance and faithfulness to Christ in the midst of persecution and even martyrdom is the call upon the life of a Christian. The harshness of our world is a good reminder, though, that Christians are "called out ones." Paul uses this sentiment to describe the church in his use of the word "ecclesia." It describes the very nature of the church as a body distinct from the world, yet very much in the middle of the rest of the world.

Our persecution and suffering, then, can be seen as an indicator of our faithfulness, especially when we intentionally live strong faith while the world looks on.