

Why is the Christian Life so Difficult?

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[0 : 00] If we could have our Bibles open at Revelation 13 and 14, that would be a help. This passage is difficult enough to understand with an open Bible, I suspect impossible with a closed one.

So, once again, it's on page 1035 in the Church Bibles. If you found this passage perplexing and difficult, you're in the same situation as a group of American students in a seminary who were studying apocalyptic literature.

They had been through Daniel, as many of you have. They had struggled with Zechariah, and now they had come to Revelation. And Revelation was completely defeating them.

When the class ended, they were delighted to go off to the gym to play basketball. This was something that was much easier to do and much easier to understand.

After the game, as they left the gym, they saw the old caretaker, Joe, sitting reading a book. And one of them said, Joe, what are you reading?

[1 : 13] He said, I'm reading the book of Revelation. Joe, even we can't understand that. How are you possibly going to understand that? They're obviously very good with our kind of people skills, as they're called nowadays.

And Joe said, it's actually very simple. Jesus wins. That is what the book of Revelation is about. Jesus wins.

And in spite of the difficulties, in spite of the strangeness of the imagery, let's not forget that as we try to make our way through these passages.

Because that is what the overriding message of the book is. Not just Jesus has won, not even just Jesus will win, but Jesus wins.

But instantly that raises another problem, doesn't it? If Jesus wins, why is the Christian life so difficult? If he has defeated the devil, if he has ascended to heaven, if he reigns on the throne of God, over heaven and earth, why is Christian life so terribly difficult?

[2 : 21] And indeed, all but impossible sometimes. And that's the question really I want us to ask tonight. That's the title of what I want to say. Why is the Christian life so difficult?

Now, the Apostle John, who writes this, is writing from a time of great difficulty and persecution. Probably the book comes almost at the end of the first century, in the 90s of that century.

It's widely believed that John would probably be one of the last people alive on earth who had known Jesus in the days when he was on earth. And at the end of the century, the Roman emperor, called Domitian, had established what he called the emperor cult.

It was a vast empire all around the Mediterranean and even going further. And how was he going to unite this vast empire, all these different peoples? And he hit on a very simple and very ingenious idea.

I'll make myself a god. They can all worship me. I will be the focus of loyalty. I will be the person to whom they'll give their allegiance.

[3 : 32] And that is the background of the book of Revelation. Everyone in the empire was supposed once a year to go to the temple, burn a pinch of incense, and say the words, Caesar is Lord.

Caesar Curios. And that is where the Roman Empire and the Christian church came into headlong collision. The Christians believed there was only one to whom the name Lord was appropriate.

Jesus is Lord, they said. And it wasn't just a chorus that they sang. It was a complete commitment. Jesus Christ is Lord, and that name Lord belongs to him and to no one else.

And at the very beginning of the book, and we sang these words earlier on, the risen Lord appears to John and says, I have the keys of death and of the world to come.

Now the Roman Emperor Domitian might have the power of life and death in the sense that he could, he had the total authority over everyone. He did not have the power of the world to come. [4 : 41] He was not Lord. He was simply a human being. But we'll mistake it. This is in a sense ancient history. What John is showing us though is that what happened then is going to continue happening.

What happened then in the first century happens in the 21st and in all the centuries between. Because our real enemy is not the Roman Empire.

Our real enemy is not the state. Our real enemy is the unholy trinity of the devil and of his two beasts.

You see, Satan parodies God. Verse 4 of 13. They worshipped the dragon. They worshipped the devil. And he calls up the first beast who is a parody of Christ himself.

Verse 3. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed. And the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. This is the Antichrist.

[5 : 45] The many Antichrists who appear throughout the last days. But there's a third beast summoned up who is a parody of the Holy Spirit. As the Spirit glorifies Christ.

As the Spirit draws attention to the Son of God. So this second beast draws attention to the Antichrist. So you see, what we've got here is the reason why Christian life is so difficult.

We face the unholy trinity, the devil, the beast, the Antichrist, and the false prophet. And we face them in the last days.

Now what are the last days? The last days are the whole period between the comings of Christ. So if somebody comes along and says, these are the last days.

And I've got a special message for them. You say, good for you. So do we. Here is the message for the last days. This is the word of God for the last days. This is the written word that points to the living word, Jesus Christ.

[6 : 49] God's last word to the world. So let's look then at these three pictures that John gives us. Three glimpses into reality. First of all, and let me just say what the pictures are first of all.

And then we'll look at them. First of all, we have the picture of the beast that comes out of the sea. Chapter 13, verses 1 to 10. And that picture tells us that persecution and hardship are inevitable.

Throughout the last days, persecution and hardship are inevitable. Secondly, verses 11 to 18, the second beast. This tells us that false teaching and deception are inevitable.

Not just persecution and hardship, but false teaching and deception. But then we went on to read chapter 14, verses 1 to 5, the third picture, which tells us that Jesus' victory is inevitable.

That's what we're going to look at over the next moment. The first picture then, the beast from the sea. Now those of you who listen to the series on Daniel will notice that this beast is a kind of composite of the four beasts that rise out of the sea in Daniel chapter 7.

[8 : 12] So let's first of all ask, where does this beast come from? And it comes from the sea. Now that means it is a real beast. When the Bible talks about the sea, particularly the great sea, it means, first of all, the Mediterranean.

Now, at the time John is writing, the Mediterranean is the center of the world. What he's saying is this beast operates at the very heart of the world, at the very heart of government.

But this beast also is a beast that arises out of the nations. Not just the nations around the Mediterranean. Very often the Bible talks about the raging sea.

It means the raging sea of the nations. Psalm 2, why do the nations rage? And the word there is of the raging sea. And also, the sea is the place of evil powers.

The sea is the place of the dragon. The sea is the place of the anti-God forces. And that's what I think chapter 21 means when it says, the first heaven on the first earth had passed away and there was no more sea.

[9 : 23] One of the reasons I didn't want to go to heaven when I was a boy was because I was told there would be no more sea. I love the sea. And I don't think it's telling us there will be no sea in that sense.

It's telling us that the powers of darkness will be no more. So that's where it comes from. And as I say, it doesn't just arise in the first century. It arises in other centuries.

Remember 1 John, and I think Dick Lucas preached on this last Sunday, many antichrists have come into the world. Not just a final antichrist at the very end of the age, but antichrists throughout history.

So what is it? We are told it has ten horns and seven heads. That suggests completeness. It suggests that this is something that straddles the whole of history.

Just as the seven churches at the beginning of the book represent the whole church between the comings. Just as the seven represents completeness, ultimately coming from Genesis 1 and the days of creation.

[10:30] And it comes, the beast I saw was like a leopard and so on. And the devil gave him his authority.

Verse 5, the beast was given a mouth, uttering haughty and blasphemous words. So what is this beast? John knew perfectly well what the beast was.

It was the persecuting Roman emperor. Domitian the emperor insisted that he was called our Lord and God. It's not at all insignificant that at the end of John's Gospel, Thomas confesses the risen Jesus as my Lord and my God.

That comes from a world and from a time when Lord and God were being claimed by the state. This is what happens when a state demands the allegiance that only belongs to God.

Rome is gone. One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound. Or rather, the Roman emperor is gone. The Rome still exists, of course. Italy still exists. But throughout history, such figures have arisen.

[11:38] Hitler, Stalin, Paul Popp, Ceausescu of Romania and so on. Anywhere where the godless power of the state, where tyranny and militarism reign.

And above all, when the state claims to be God. Look at verse 4. They worship the beast saying, Who is like the beast? Who can fight against him?

Deliberate echo of Exodus 15. The great song where Moses says, Who is like the Lord? The Lord is a warrior. So, we know that even today, many Christians in Sudan, in other places in the world, are suffering from this beast.

This tyrannical beast, who will not allow them to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, who persecutes them, because they are faithful to the Lamb. Persecutes them, because they will not bow down and give allegiance to the state.

But notice his power has limits. Verse 5 again. It was allowed to exercise authority for 42 months.

[12:47] It was given a mouth, and it was allowed to exercise authority. Jesus said to Pilate, You will have no power at all, unless it is given you from above.

And what are these 42 months, or three and a half years, sometimes called a time, times, and half a time, occurring first of all in the book of Daniel, and referring initially to that time, when Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to destroy the Jewish state, and impose his authority on them, for a period of three and a half years, which they were rescued by Judas Maccabeus.

But in apocalyptic writing, in books like Revelation, it means a limited and specified time. And I believe it means the whole time between the comings, between Christ's ascension to heaven, and his return from heaven.

This kind of thing is going to happen. And this beast is going to win many victories. Verse 7. It was allowed to make war on the saints, and to conquer them.

And authority was given it over every tribe, and people, and language, and nation. And all who dwell on the earth will worship it. Not absolutely everybody. Notice that's qualified.

[14:09] Everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world. In the book of life, of the lamb that was slain. Then the word that occurs to the churches as well.

If anyone has an ear, let him hear. In other words, this beast is enormously powerful, but it isn't all powerful. It is possible to resist this beast.

As Peter says in his first letter, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Verse 10 is a chilling verse. If anyone is to be taken captive, to captivity he goes.

If anyone is to be slain with the sword, with the sword must he be slain. In other words, these things are going to happen. Persecution will take place. Murder and violence will happen.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. We need to be courageous in our Christian living. We need to be bold.

[15:07] We need to stand up and be counted. That's one of the marks in the New Testament of a good shepherd. Not just that he feeds the sheep, but that he fights the wolf.

He sang a moment ago, Go wolves, devour your fold. So this first beast, the persecuting beast of the state. We don't know very much about this beast in the Western world, do we?

There's been very, very little in the way of persecution in the Western world for a very long time. But I think we know an awful lot about the second beast to whom we now turn.

The first beast, the beast of persecution. The second beast, the beast of deception and false teaching. This beast rises out of the earth.

Unlike the Son of Man who comes from heaven, this beast rises out of the earth. And elsewhere he's called the false prophet. In later chapters, in chapters 16, 19 and 20, he's called the false prophet.

[16:16] He's much less daunting, isn't he? He's like a lamb. But notice, he speaks with his master's voice. He spoke like a dragon.

Rather like those detective stories, isn't it? Where you get the nasty detective and the gentle, friendly detective. They both have exactly the same purpose, don't they?

To make the person confess. And the gentle one is always far more dangerous than the nasty one. This one, this beast is the beast which has been so successful in the Western world the last 200 years.

This is the beast of false teaching. This is the beast of lies. This is the beast of propaganda. The beast against whom Jude warns.

The beast against whom Peter warns in his second letter. The beast whom John has already warned about in chapter 2 to the church in Thyatira. You tolerate, he says, that woman Jezebel who misleads my servants by her teaching.

[17:21] If the Western church has not known much persecution, it has certainly known the depredations wreaked by this second beast.

How does this second beast work? Let's look at it. Verse 12, it exercises all the authority of the first beast and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast.

This beast operates by drawing people away from their true allegiance. Their true allegiance to the Lord God to some false allegiance. This is the beast of idolatry.

Isn't it so significant that John ends his first letter, little children, keep yourselves from idols. This is the beast of idolatry. This beast works by the spectacular.

Verse 13, it performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast.

[18:21] It deceives those who dwell on the earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. Miracle is not necessarily a sign of the Spirit of God.

It may be, but it isn't necessarily. Once again, John in his first letter, test the spirits to see whether they are of God. And what this beast does, it looks good, it looks spectacular, but in the end it achieves nothing.

In the end, it leads people into unreality. And this is the beast that demands conformity. Economic boycott, verse 17, no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark.

That is the name of the beast, or the number of its name. A kind of thought police, a kind of political correctness. One of the dangerous things happening in our society is a change in the meaning of tolerance.

Tolerance used to mean that I could profoundly disagree with you, and you could profoundly disagree with me, but we would be happy to accept each other's disagreement.

[19:39] We would agree to differ. As Voltaire famously said, I detest what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. That's not what tolerance means nowadays.

Tolerance means tolerating only views that fit in with what the establishment like. It means that there is no heresy, except to believe that there is heresy.

That's the only heresy nowadays, to believe there is heresy. Usually heresy nowadays is called interesting new insights. In my early days in Durham, when David Jenkins was Bishop of Durham, his views were described as interesting new insights.

They were actually old, recycled Gnostic views that were around when John was writing. And that's the problem. Views which are, these kind of views become fashionable and popular.

And liberalism, and such preaching as it produces, has emptied the churches, and produced deadness, spiritual deadness. That is how the devil works.

[20:48] The devil doesn't primarily work by seances, and Ouija boards, and black magic, and the occult. Oh, he's quite happy to trap people that way. It's much, much more successful.

He can trap people by false teaching. If he can lure people away from the true gospel, that is the way the devil works. If he can capture the pulpits, if he can capture the theological faculties, and theological colleges, he's won a major victory.

And who can doubt that he has been enormously successful in the Western world in the last two and a half centuries? Who can doubt that he has destroyed the faith of so many?

It's not just in the church, in the world as well. Think of the lies. Think of the two great lies of the century that's just passed. The lie of communism, and the lie of Nazism.

Think of the millions of people who are deceived. The millions of lives who were lost. The oceans of blood that were shed. How do we fight this beast then?

[21 : 50] We fight this beast by proclaiming the truth. The one thing the devil cannot stand up to is the truth. The one weapon he cannot fight is the Word of God.

That's why John says in verse 18, this calls for wisdom. And wisdom is the mind of Christ revealed in Scripture. I know you're all hoping for some brilliant insight on 666.

I've got to disappoint you. It is the number of a man, and his number is 666. If you read the commentaries, you'll find many, many, many pages on who this name is.

We are told by some commentators, this is the notorious Roman Emperor Nero. The trouble is, if you're going to get 666 by adding up the letters of Nero's name, in ancient Greek and Hebrew, there were no numbers.

They simply used letters of the alphabet. You've got to put Nero's name into Hebrew, and you've got to miss out one letter. And if you do that, then you'll get 666. And there are all kinds of similar attempts.

[23 : 04] I think it's better to take it in the whole sweep of the book itself. In apocalyptic writing, indeed in biblical writing, the number 7 stands for God and His perfection.

Number 6 stands for humanity who don't make it. Not good enough is written over human endeavor. 666, repeated sin and failure.

Repeated attempts to make good and yet not succeeding. Isn't that the wonderful thing about the gospel? We can't make it, but the gospel is a gospel for those who can't make it.

The gospel is a gospel for those who are not good enough. This beast, for all its spectacular powers, for all its awesome rhetoric, for all its cleverness and all its powers of persuasion is simply not good enough.

And I think that's ultimately what lies behind 666. Not a specific individual. See, one of the problems often about the study of the book of Revelation is that these figures were identified with specific individuals.

[24 : 18] And that was both right and wrong. A figure like Hitler is indeed an antichrist figure. A false teacher is indeed a false prophet like this one.

But the point is that these appear in every generation. And we mustn't distance ourselves from them. Hardship and persecution are inevitable.

Deception and false teaching are inevitable. But thirdly, Jesus' victory is inevitable. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet in the manner of visions and dreams fade away and a new picture fills the scene.

Then I looked and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb. He is already there. In chapter 1, we met him, or if you read chapter 1, you meet him standing in the midst of the churches.

In chapters 4 and 5, he stands before the throne of God and receives the worship of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. Now he stands on Mount Zion, the picture of the city of God and the people of God who had his name and his father's name.

[25 : 37] Not the name of the beast, not the number of his name, not the mark of the beast, but the name of God and the name of Christ written on their foreheads.

And they sing a new song. Heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. Verse 3, they were singing a new song.

A new song is not necessarily brand new in the sense that no one had thought about it before. This new song is echoing the song of Exodus, who is like the Lord.

But it's new in the sense that they're experiencing it in a new way because of the victory of the Lamb. But who are the 144,000?

If you've ever spoken to a Jehovah's Witness, you'll know exactly who they are. They are the Jehovah's Witnesses, we are told. They've not succeeded in persuading the rest of the world to

believe that, I don't think.

[26 : 35] But who are they? In chapter 7, they appear before this. They appear as 144,000 from the various tribes, from the tribe of Judah, 12,000, the tribe of Benjamin, 12,000.

A passage that sounds rather like the football scores, although I wish my team could get that kind of score. But this kind of, this number, which is 12 times 12, all the people of God in both Old and New Testament times.

And I think the fact that they are given a number, and they are also called a multitude that no one could count, means the number is known to God. He knows the number of his people.

But from a human point of view, it's impossible to count. It's uncalculable. The multitudes will stand before the throne of God and of the Lamb. But the real problem, isn't it, is verse 4.

It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. Is this then a celibate elite who are special and singled out from the rest of the redeemed?

[27 : 47] Now that can't possibly be so. As Paul in 1 Corinthians sees celibacy and marriage as both good things and as both of them are charismata, gifts of the Spirit, one is not better than the other.

Therefore, it can't possibly mean that. I want to suggest what it means is not those who have not defiled themselves with women in general terms, but those who have not defiled themselves with a particular woman whom you can read about in chapter 17.

If you just glance ahead, please, at chapter 17, just over the page. The third great vision in the book. And the angel says to the angel, verse 3, 17 verse 3, carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names and it had seven heads and ten horns.

Verse 5, on her forehead was written a name of mystery, Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations. This is the unholy city, the city of Babylon in contrast to the city of Zion. These 144,000 are the bride of someone else. They are the bride of the Lamb whose marriage we read about later on in the book. It's not a question of a celibate elite.

[29 : 14] It's not a question of the marital state of these people at all. It's a question that these are people who belong to Christ, who belong to the Lamb, who are His bride.

And they are not, they do not belong to the beast nor the woman who rides the beast. They are blameless, not that they are perfect, but they are washed from all their sins. And later on we're going to read about that same group.

To them was given white linen to wear for white linen is the righteousness of the saints. And just two things as we finish. The first thing is this.

Remember, this is not a sequence of events. It's not that the first beast rises and then sometime later the second beast rises and then sometime later still the Lamb stands on Mount Zion.

These are parallel realities. This evening, in the 21st century, these are realities. The beast of persecution rampages over much of the earth.

[30 : 16] The false prophet rampages over so much of our western world. But parallel to that, the Lamb is standing on Zion. And the second thing is this.

The Lamb has already won the victory. Because of his death and resurrection, the victory is certain. It's not just that we live our lives and then at the end there is resurrection.

It means that because of the resurrection of Jesus, the judgment has already begun. Remember what Paul said in Acts 17. God has appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed and he has given assurance by raising him from the dead.

So this passage is saying to us, Christian life is tough. Terribly tough. There is no guarantee that we will escape any of these things mentioned in chapter 13.

What chapter 14 is saying, since our path to glory cannot be thwarted. Let's live in the light of Christ's victory. Let's proclaim him Lord and let's take that message into the world because one day God will be God and the world will know it.

[31 : 34] That's the reality of the gospel. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.