

Session 3: Keep Your Friends Close but your Enemies Closer?

Rev 12:1 - 13:18

(Scripture references based on NIV)

1. Key Learning Points

- Recognise the pattern of persecution and protection present between God, His People and Satan.
- Understand the various ways in which Satan and the other adversaries seek to deceive and persecute God's people.
- Appreciate the hope and perseverance God calls us to amidst oppression and suffering.

2. Warm-up Activity / Starter Question

- What's something / someone you fear the most? Why?
- Share your different understanding / definitions of hope. (What does it feel like? Where does it come from? etc.)

Activity

- It's been two sessions since we started Revelation... which of these cats best represents how you're feeling now? Explain.



3. Opening Prayer

- Commit the session ahead into God's hands, trusting him to guide the discussion.
- Thank him for the opportunity to study His word in detail and a community to journey with.
- Pray for open hearts and curiosity for those listening and wisdom and discernment for those leading the session.
- Prayer for God's strength to carry learning points into daily application.

4. Context

Link to Previous Study

- The previous session explores the beautiful imagery and reality of unceasing heavenly worship that we have a choice to join in with.
- In this week, we get a closer look at God's protection and his call to faithful perseverance and worship amidst the reality of suffering and persecution.

Overview

- Rev 12: Conflict between God and Satan recounted from the past to the present day
 - v1-6: Satan's attack and failure to destroy Jesus and God's followers. (the Gospel essentially.)
 - v7-12: Defeat of Satan in Heaven
 - v13-15: God protects His people even as Satan seeks to destroy them.
 - v16: Satan's perseverance in persecuting Christians in the present day.
- Link between the two chapters
 - The details of how Satan persecutes Christians is detailed in Rev 13.
- Rev 13: The Two Beasts
 - v1-8: The Beast out of the Sea
 - v11-17: The Beast out of the Earth
 - v9-10,18: Call for perseverance and instruction to Christians.

Brief Guide on Interpretation

Interpretative Lenses

This is a quick breakdown for this session's purposes; refer to Ps Ian's study guide for more details.

The characters, places, and events in Revelation might be understood using various interpretive lenses. Where the Beasts are first described in Rev 13, it is helpful to understand the different ways these verses might be understood. Each approach has its own strengths and weaknesses, so it is good to see the spectrum of interpretations.

- **The Preterist**
 - Assumes that all events of Revelation have already happened in the 1st Century
- **The Symbolic / Idealist**
 - Interprets everything as merely a symbol of a timeless truth, detaching itself from the idea that these descriptions point to literal and specific people or events.
- **The Futurist**
 - Assumes that all the events in Revelation are yet to happen and will be fulfilled in some future time.

Numerology

- Numbers tend to be symbolic of spiritual truths.
- Remember that repetition is one way that the Bible highlights certain ideas to us.
- Bottomline: Look for patterns, not exact figures.

Symbolism

These 2 chapters are particularly heavy on symbolism and imagery especially with the detailed descriptions of the Dragon and the Beasts. While these symbols definitely enrich and deepen understanding of the passage, it is not necessary to go in depth for every detail!

5. Scripture Reading

Assign two youths to read one chapter each in Revelation 12-13.

6. Discussion / Exploration

These chapters are heavy on symbolism and descriptions that can be quite abstract. The many questions and details included in this session's material are all intended to help us respond to questions 2b and 5b more meaningfully. You are encouraged to assign the most time and emphasis there.

Part 1: The Great Drama and the Beasts.

Optional activity/ idea for Q1. Please prepare one sheet of mahjong paper for this activity.

- Objective : Visualise and appreciate the vivid imagery used by John.
- Each youth will have 5 seconds to add on to the drawing of the character based on what they have read and the vIBeSsss before passing the paper to the next person
- When everyone has finished, youths will explain their addition of particular details.

1) Read through Rev 12, focusing on the main characters in this chapter. Who are they and how are they described? Who might they represent?

For YSGLs, the focus of this question is mainly to help youths identify the main characters of this drama - no need to focus too much on the details of how they are described unless the youths have questions! Note that the table is not exhaustive.

Characters	Description	What they represent
Woman (12:1-2, 14, 17)	• Clothed with the sun • Moon under her feet • Crown of 12 stars • In pain (pregnant)	• The woman represents God's people (past and present). • 12 stars → 12 tribes of Israel/ 12 apostles • Pain represents the suffering of the church
Son (12:5-6)	• Rule all with an iron sceptre (12:5)	• The son represents Jesus. • Iron sceptre → judgement, power and authority
Dragon (12:3-17)	• Enormous, red • Seven heads • Ten horns • Seven crowns (12:3) • Ancient Serpent (12:9)	• The dragon represents Satan (12:9). • Many horns, heads and crowns represent immense power and earthly authority (12:3)

2) With reference to the characters identified and the events in Rev 12:

- a. What are the key events in this drama? Hint: look for action words!!
- b. What do we learn about the relationships between God, Satan, and God's people?

Key Events
The Woman cries out in pain and prepares to give birth (v2).
Dragon seeks to destroy Woman and Child (v4).
The Woman is saved and protected by God (v5-6).
Dragon loses the battle against God and is flung to Earth (v9).
Dragon continues to attack both Woman and her children (v13).
The Woman is miraculously protected and saved again and again (v6, 14, 16).
Dragon vows to continue waging war on the children of the Woman (v17).

This is one of the more important, "How does this apply to us?" portion, so YSGLs probably want to spend a bit more time here!

Relationship between God and His people

- **God protects and preserves his people during persecution directly and indirectly.**
 - Prepares a place of refuge in advance (v6).
 - God knew they would need this place of protection!
 - The woman is given the wings of an eagle so that she may fly to safety (v14).
 - Earth opens up to consume the river intended to sweep the woman away (v16).
- **Important nuance: The way God protects his people is not always as simple as physically bringing them out of trouble.**
 - He works through many different methods.
 - v14,16 don't explicitly mention God as the one acting - but we might assume that it IS Him because we know that he has authority over all the earth and He may also work through natural means to preserve his people.
 - Ultimately, the miraculous preservation and protection of God's people is what stands out.

God's relationship with Satan

- God always wins and his plans will prevail, Satan always loses.
- Thwarts Satan's plan to destroy Jesus (v5).
- His armies defeat Satan and hurl him down to Earth (v7-9).

Satan's relationship with God's people

- Satan furiously persecutes God's people.
- He wants to see them condemned and tries to stop God's plan of salvation brought through Jesus (v5).
- Separates them from God - by leading them astray, accusing them (v9-10).
- Pursues and attempts to harm the Woman (v13, 15, 17).

The drama and all its imagery may be a lot for younger youths to process, so it's alright to leave things here!

3) Rev 13 tells us of two great beasts. What does this chapter tell us about the character of the Beasts and the type of persecution that Christians will suffer?

YSGLs are advised to split the group into 2 for this activity with each group focusing on one beast.

Group 1 (The Beast out of the Sea): Rev 13:1-10

Group 2 (The Beast out of the Earth): Rev 13:11-14:5

The Beast out of the Sea

Description	Characteristic
Worship due to the beast's power and authority. "Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?" (v4, 5, 8)	Worship is rooted in fear of power and persecution.
Blasphemes and slanders God, his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. (v6)	Insults everything good and holy, everything that Christians hold dear in their faith.
Wage war against and conquer God's people. (v5,7)	Fierce suffering and persecution of God's people is inevitable.
Exercise authority for 42 months ONLY	God remains sovereign - the suffering will only last for a limited time.
Those who do not have their name in the Lamb's book of life will worship the Beast (v8).	Those who are not true followers of Christ will turn to worship of the Beast.

The Beast out of the Earth

Description	Characteristic
Made the Earth and the Inhabitants worship the first Beast (v12). Set up an image in honour of the first beast (v14).	Encourages and cultivates idol worship.
Performed great signs (e.g. fire from heaven) in front of everyone (v13,14).	Prideful and deceitful.
Power to give breath to the image of the first beast (v15).	False signs to mimic prophets of the Old Testament and lead believers astray.

Kill all who refused to worship the image (v15).	Persecute Christians who will not conform to the world.
Force all people who buy and sell to receive the mark of the beast (v16).	Brings systems of oppression and pain to people of earth. Forced ostracisation of God's people. Forces people to focus on the material needs of their present and so turn away from God (v17).

The overall imagery of beasts also plays a role in showing that these systems are neither humane or civil but rather destructive and mindless.

4) What do you think the Beasts represent?

Youths are really not expected to know these different interpretations. Please feel free to share the information in the table below after hearing some intuitive responses from your members.

	<u>Preterist</u>	<u>Idealist / Symbolic</u>	<u>Futurist</u>
First Beast	Past Kingdoms which have persecuted Israel • Egypt • Medo-Persia • Babylon • Greece • Rome (or specifically, Emperor Nero)	Any evil governmental systems that persecute Christians • Combination of the evil in all previous kingdoms • Mainly political	Specific future person who will slander Christ and persecute Christians • A revived version of the Roman empire? • Perhaps, a future one-world government made through technology?
Second Beast	Jewish leadership who had enforced submission to Rome and persecuted early Christians.	Any false teachers and prophets preaching false religion.	Distinct future world religion that goes against God's Word and ways.
Mark of the Beast (666)	Since Hebrew and Greek letters had numerical value, the Roman Emperor Nero's name apparently added up to 666!	Symbol of Possession - indicates who you belong to.	Some physical identification by which Christians will be excluded from the world systems

There is merit in explaining these views to inform understanding but the symbolism of the beasts should not be reduced to only these. If anything, the existence of these different views might show the continuity and relevance of these messages in past, present and future.

Part 2: Hope and a Call to Action

5a) Get one of the youths or YSGLs to read Rev 13 again. The rest of the youths can close their eyes and imagine themselves standing on the shore as the beasts arise from the Sea and the Earth. What do you see / hear? What do you feel?

This question is mainly to help youths appreciate and immerse themselves in the richly vivid imagery of Revelation - there are no correct answers :))

5b) With the knowledge of how fearsome the Beasts of Revelation are, how does John provide confidence and hope? How should we live our lives with this hope? Supp: For confidence and hope, refer to Rev 12:9-17, 13:5. For how we should live, refer to Rev 12:10-12,17, 13:9-10, 18.

This is one of the more important questions to focus on. YSGLs may want to direct them to specific verse references stated above rather than having them read whole chapters again.

Confidence and Hope

- Satan has already been defeated by God (12:9).
- God's salvation and power is present in the here and now (12:10).
- Jesus's redemptive blood saves us (12:11,17).
- Christians will always face persecution and suffering - be ready! (12:12-13, 17).
- The beasts are only allowed some authority since all true authority ultimately belongs to God (13:5).
- Persecution and reign of worldly forces is limited and temporary (13:5).

Way of Life

- Live with eternity in mind → face death bravely and do not become overly attached to the life you have now (12:11).
- Keep God's commands and remain blameless (12:17).
- Patiently endure persecution (13:10).
- Stay faithful (13:10).
- Do not be surprised or afraid if you are treated with hostility and violence. Do not respond with your own violence (13:10)!
- Seek wisdom and insight to identify deceptions of the Beast (13:18).
- Worship and Praise God (12:10-12).
 - Call for worship even before the dragon is fully defeated (12:10-12).
- Open your hearts and listen carefully! (13:9).

[OPTIONAL] Why do you think these 2 scenes are revealed to John one after another? What does it reveal about God's heart for his people? Supp: What is the purpose of detailing the history of Satan's defeat and persecution of God's people? Why does each section on the Beasts end with instructions and encouragement to God's people?

We recognize that this question may not be one that can be answered easily, but we do believe that it helps us observe the greater pattern of unshakeable hope throughout Revelation!

- God does not want his people to be unaware of the enemies and persecution they are facing / will face but He will never leave them without hope.
- Being able to trace the history of God's battle and defeat of Satan as well as his protection of His people in Rev 12 frames Rev 13 in a slightly more hopeful light even as we are confronted with fearsome images of the adversaries and trials we will face.
- The continuous calls for perseverance throughout both chapters are a constant reminder that times of persecution do not last forever.

7. Main Discipleship Takeaway

Suffering, persecution and deception by God's enemies are a present reality and a warning for our future. Yet, we are still called to patient hope and perseverance with confidence in God's sovereignty and past faithfulness.

8. Application / Reflection questions

Try to choose at least one question from each section.

Drama of the Woman and the Dragon

- What is a spiritual battle / struggle in your life where you most need God's assurance and protection?
- What are some sins that make you feel the most distant from God?
- What do you think Satan would accuse you of in the heavenly courtroom?

The Adversaries

- What are some practices / cultures that the world has deemed "good" but are displeasing to God? Which of these do you wrestle with most?
- Both Rev 12 and 13 promise suffering and persecution for Christians. Has that been true of your own Christian journey? Are we, perhaps, too comfortable in our faith?

Divine Response

- Reflect on and share your instinctive response (feelings, actions etc.) to suffering in your own life. How is it different from the way we are called to respond in Revelation?
- How can we as a YSG, YM, and the wider church community encourage one another to heed the call for patient endurance and perseverance? Give practical steps and commit to them as a group.

9. Closing Prayer

YSGs can do this part but are highly advised for them to split youths into smaller groups to allow for a more intimate time of prayer.

- Spend some time in silence meditating on learning points that have been brought up during the session.
- Thank God for his lasting faithfulness to us, that he is the hope that we can cling to despite whatever the world might throw at us.
- Commit the week ahead into his hands, that the discussions may be lived out rather than just remain as conversations.