



## Revelation 13 & the Death of God

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"Where was God when the towers fell?" a TV reporter asked just two days after the horrific slaughter of thousands in the World Trade Centre on September 11th 2002. And that is a legitimate question, maybe one you have asked yourself. But tonight I want to turn the tables slightly and ask another question: 'Supposing God wasn't anywhere, in that there is no God at all? Then what?' Indeed, I want to go further and ask: what does our world begin to *look* like when God is in effect declared 'dead' – said not to exist?

There are those called militant atheists who have long argued that there is no God – people like Bertrand Russell, Polly Toynbee and Richard Dawkins. So what sort of world results from believing this to be so? Is it a kind world or a cruel world? But there are also those, maybe the vast majority of people in our country today, who, whilst not *denying* that God exists, live as if that in fact were the case. They can be called 'practical atheists' that is, they would say they *believe* in God, but to be brutally honest he hardly makes an h'apeth of difference to their day-to-day lives and so he might as well not be there at all. What sort of world results from *that* way of thinking and behaving? Is it a brighter world or a darker world?

Now the attempt to 'kill off God' and render belief in God as something stupid or at the very least irrelevant has been gathering momentum since at least the middle of the 19th century. It was a German philosopher called Friedrich Nietzsche

who wrote a parable in the 1880s in which the main character, a man called Zarathustra, was the first person to use the phrase 'God is dead'; meaning that he never really ever existed and the sooner we wake up to the fact the better. In the story, Zarathustra says to a young man, 'There is nothing of what you speak; there is no devil and no hell. Your soul will be dead even sooner than your body, so don't fear anything any more.' In other words, religion in general and Christianity in particular is a load of Tommy rot. Nietzsche claimed that man was like a rope, stretched between an animal and a Superman – that is his evolutionary position and we need to hasten on to the next stage – the super-race. This is achieved by what he called 'the will to *power*.' Now, can you guess which famous politician of the 20th century was most influenced by that philosophy? It was none other than Adolf Hitler.

But you say, 'Yes, but he was rather extreme.' Admittedly there are others who are gentler in their belief in God's death. This comes out in Evelyn Waugh's book, *Brideshead Revisited*. It is all very English and Upper Class, set before the Second World War but captures the majority view held by our contemporaries. The narrator writes of his friend Sebastian like this: 'Sebastian's faith was an enigma to me at the time, but not one which I felt particularly concerned to solve... the view implicit in my education was that the basic narrative of Christianity had long been exposed as a myth, and that opinion was now divided as to whether its ethical teaching was of present value, a division in which the main weight went against it: religion was a hobby which some people professed and others not; at best it was slightly ornamental, at worst it was the province of 'complexes' and 'inhibitions' – catchwords of the decade – and of the intolerance, hypocrisy and sheer stupidity attributed to it for centuries.' That about sums it up! Religion might be alright for prettying up a ceremony – like a wedding – but that is as far as it goes; take it any further and you will end up in the mad house – or at least that is where you should be put.

So let me return to our question: what does our world begin to look like if there is no God or an irrelevant God – which boils down to the same thing in practice – a world without God? Well, I want to turn you to a part of the Bible which shows us in the most graphic way what form such

a world takes and it is there in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, and chapter 13.

Just listen to this description of a world without God:

*1 And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. He had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on his horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. 2 The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. 4 Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshipped the beast and asked, "Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?" 5 The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise his authority for forty-two months. 6 He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. 7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them. And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. 8 All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.*

Now, as we read that, at least two thoughts would have been going through your mind. The first is: this is scary and weird. And you would be right, it is meant to be. The second thought is – what does all this talk of dragons, beasts, blasphemies, murder and mayhem actually mean? Well, what may seem strange and unfamiliar to us, would have been far from strange to the book's readers when they first picked this up. This is a way of writing which was well known in the world of the first century – just like texting which has its own code if you like, is a familiar way of communicating amongst people today. The language John uses is not literal but symbolic. This way of writing, called apocalyptic, which means a 'lifting of the veil', is designed to help us get a glimpse of the unseen spiritual realities at work behind the seen political realities. And it has rightly been likened to the way we use political

cartoons. Think of it like this: when someone sees a drawing in a newspaper of a slightly impish faced, big-eared, grinning, balding man – you know without being told who it is – the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. What a cartoon does is to highlight features which can universally be recognised and can capture the character far better than any photograph. Well, that is what these word 'pictures' are designed to do.

So who, then, is the beast? Let's work it out. Whatever it is has great strength. It has the speed of a leopard; the might of a great bear and the terror of a ferocious lion. It has tremendous authority too, for it has a throne and ten crowns. It has been through many a battle, having wounds (verse 3), but it soon recovers and wins every time – and so it appears unbeatable. It sees itself as answerable to no one, least of all God for it acts as if it is god – uttering blasphemies and demanding total allegiance – worship. It certainly is a *world* power for the whole world is astonished by it in verse 3 and is in awe of its greatness. Its might is formidable and its influence irresistible – every people's group comes under its sway (verse 7). In the words of Rolf Harris, 'Can you see who it is yet?' Well, you should have recognised it from our first video clip – the film *Gladiator*. If you were living in the first century and you heard these words being read, you would pick up on the symbolism right away, for this is Rome. This is the arrogance of the Caesars who took to themselves divine titles. In the 60s the emperor Nero had coins minted, on which he was referred to as 'the Saviour of the World' and in the 90s Domitian had people address him as 'Our Lord and our God'. What is being described here in the first instance is the gruesome reality of the only Empire to have lasted a thousand years – the Roman Empire.

But the writer is doing much more than stating the blindingly obvious – Rome Rules OK – everybody knew that. He is telling us something much more profound about what happens when a world abandons God, when *any* society decides to go it alone and act as if *it* were God. Then it comes under the influence of another beast, an invisible creature described in verse 1 as 'the dragon.' Now in the previous chapter we are told exactly who this creature is (Revelation 12:9), he is 'that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the world astray.' And as the world moves further and further away from God and his laws

then it nestles further and further into the bosom of Satan and society itself become more and more devilish. It happens every time. So this is not just the first century world we are reading about – it is our world, it is any world which declares the blasphemies of verse 6 that God is dead.

The nightmare scenario which the Bible paints is that a world without God is a world without hope. It is a frightening world; a brutal world; a dangerous world. One thing which stands out above all else in this apocalyptic nightmare is the dominance and abuse of *power*. It is by power the nations have been subdued. It is people and political systems which in abandoning God become agents of evil – instruments of the devil – such that they take on features of wild and ferocious animals – like leopards, bears and lions. You see, if God has been banished from his universe then all hell breaks loose sooner or later. There is no way of deciding what is right and wrong – so *might* becomes *right*. If there is no God to whom men and women will be accountable, then you get away with what you can get away with. If this life is all there is – we come from nowhere and we are going nowhere – then we can all make up our own minds to live how we want and if it is at the expense of others, tough. If there is no God, then why get upset about the twin towers at all? Or as we saw in the second clip, people are taken to one side and shot. There is no point in railing against God since there is no God to rail against. Its just one of those things – thousands die every day from all sorts of causes – why should this be so special? Well, we think it is special because *people* have decided to fly planes into building and shoot people without trial and we think people should be accountable for what they do. But accountable to whom?

Friends, in a world without God two things follow.

First, **no one is safe** – verse 10: *'If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.'* Take off the restraints and killing and conquest will result. 'Wait a minute,' you say, 'aren't most wars caused by religion?' You would think so to hear some people talk. Professor Richard Dawkins in his book *A Devil's Chaplain* writes: 'Only the wilfully blind fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent

enmities of the world today.' 'The real axis of evil,' one British journalist responded to counter President Bush, is 'Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.' Now I am not here to defend 'religion' and certainly not those religions which are inherently violent. And yes, there have been things done in the name of Christianity that should not have been done as they are a contradiction of the one who said 'Put away the sword, he who lives by the sword will die by the sword' – Jesus. Ten thousand died in the Inquisition. But let's get the facts straight and put even that figure into perspective. Which century was the century in which atheism mushroomed? It was the 20th century. This is the period Alexander Solzhenitsyn called 'the cave man century.' It was that arch-atheist Joseph Stalin who said 'A single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic', and he should have known because under him over 40 million of his fellow countrymen were wiped out. Between 1914 and 1990 the population of the world tripled, 'but' writes Philip Bobbit, 'an estimated 187 million persons – about 10% of the population of 1900 – were killed or fated to die by human agency.' Two million people died in Cambodia's killing fields under Pol Pot – a quarter of the population. And where did he get that idea from? The Bible? Hardly – it was in Paris as he studied under another atheist – Jean Paul Sartre. Sixty-five million million died under Mao – also an atheist. Of course no one is safe when God is declared dead, because it is then left up to men to make up the rules and you can be quite sure they will not be benign, not if they have got the power of the beast.

Now we might think, 'We are alright because we live in a democratic society.' Really? What commends democracy is not that it ensures good governments, for useless governments have been voted in the world over. Hitler was voted in, remember! What it does ensure is that we can get rid of the blighters if we don't like them. But then what happens when the power to decide right and wrong is not kept by the favoured few but surrendered to the majority? Well, then by virtue of a 51% majority vote, what was considered unthinkable becomes law: euthanasia for example – it certainly won't be safe to be an old person if that comes in; or children taken into care because their parent's hold unacceptable ideas – like mild corporal punishment – a smack on the hand; or people – even Bishops – being threatened with

prosecution by our present day police because they have had the gall to publicly say that they think homosexual practise is wrong. But *if* there is no higher law to which we can appeal, then that is all you are left with – might *is* right. You may not like it but you can hardly argue against it. Everything is reduced to *power* politics – the winners are those who have loudest voices to shout you down with or have the biggest club to bash you with.

‘But,’ you say, ‘there are plenty of atheists who are opposed to every kind of violence and believe in democracy.’ Of course there are. And I know some atheists who are *very* nice people. But what I am saying is that they have no rational *basis* from which to object to people being violent if that is what *they* want to do – if, at bottom, there is no God. Say goodbye to God in the heavens and you can say goodbye to peace on earth – history proves it time and time again.

Let’s be honest: by all the social indicators available, are we any happier as a society than we were 50 years ago – with the increase in depression, suicide, drug abuse, sexual disease, and family breakdown? Sure we have more *things*, but then we have to employ more anti-theft devices to protect them. Let me tell you something: in 1921 there was 1 crime recorded for every 370 inhabitants in England and Wales, in 2001 it was 1 in 10.

But also in a world without God, **no limit is set**. The 1960s has been called the permissive society. That is not quite right. It should have been the ‘transgressive society’ – the thrill was in breaking whatever rule there was. But what happens when there are no more rules to break, especially since there is no God to give us the rules? The answer – chaos and decay. Who cares about litter being thrown around which looks unsightly since we have exhibitions made up of the stuff at the Tate Gallery and this is called ‘art’? Who cares if the most foul and obscene language is now coming from the mouths of 5-year-olds – it is only the language which appears on our TV screens and is called entertainment. No. What we see, and what we shall see more and more, is what happens to a world which has abandoned God.

So let me tell you the good news about the God

who has not abandoned his world. Notice in verse 7 that this beast ‘was *given* power’ to make war against the saints – that is Christians. Who do you think gave this power? The answer: God. When a people decide to turn their backs on their Maker, it is only because God *grants* them the power to do so. He gives them up to follow the logical outcome of their position. But if God were to *totally* give us up then we would be in hell. In the meantime, that is where we are heading. But may it not be that through this ‘giving us up’, God is wanting us to recognise what a terrible and foolish thing it is to ignore him? That without him we do not make a better world but a worse world? That God so loves us he wants us to wake up to what is happening before it is too late?

You see what we need is not just a new resolve or a new government policy ‘to be nice’, we need a new power. A power which comes from God and is directed by God. We need someone with whom we can co-operate who will lovingly rule, guide and guard our lives, who will start to clean up the dirt in our souls, and put us back in touch with our Maker and help us to get on with cleaning the world up with him. And in verse 8 we are told that God has given us such a one – he is referred to as ‘*The Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.*’ He is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Son of God, our creator, who came into this very world being described here. He didn’t flaunt his power to oppress people like Mao, he channelled his power to help people – giving sight to the blind, healing to the sick, hope to the despairing. He came and taught us how we were meant to live – not killing off our enemies but loving them. Natural divisions he overcame, so people who would normally be at each other’s throats like tax collectors and revolutionaries, he joined together into one group of followers. But more than all of this, as was foretold by the prophet 800 years before, he was to give his life over to be slaughtered, like a sacrificial lamb. So in a plan worked out with his heavenly Father back in eternity, he was to pay the debt for this moral rebellion of ours and clear away the barrier we have made between us and our Maker, by dying on a cross. That was the day God *really* did die. That was the day we took our Maker and murdered him. But three days later he was raised to life as the rightful King of the whole universe and one day he is going to come back and put wrongs to right and we will all have to stand

before him then. He will make a new heaven and a new earth and for all those who have submitted to him as Ruler, they shall share that reign with him. But this future new life can be experienced in part *now* as he gives us new hearts and a new power as he takes up residence in our lives by His Spirit. And tonight he is inviting you to embrace him; to join the counter-revolution, with Christ as your leader and your friend. Do not buy into the lie that God is dead – I tell you Christ is very much alive and he lovingly calls *you* to share in that life changing reality now as we pray.

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