

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

DATE: SUNDAY, 26TH OF SEPTEMBER 2021 | STEVE WIMBLE

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-8

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-8

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

NOTES FOR LEADERS:

There will be a baby dedication at the 10h30 service on the 17th of October. Anyone interested in dedicating their baby is invited to attend the baby dedication teaching taking place at the church this Sunday, the 3rd of October, at 11h30.

START TALKING

1. Which part of Sunday's message was most impactful for you and why?
2. Would you rather be an oscar-winning movie star or an award-winning author?

START THINKING

1. On Sunday, Steve said that these verses are ultimately about our allegiance to God. What are some of the things we are faced with that test our allegiance/commitment to God?
2. Read Deuteronomy 6:4-8. It's all about our hearts. God wants to be the top priority in our hearts, not just our actions and thoughts. Can you think of an area in your life that God has challenged you recently to have Him as first priority in? (e.g. decision making, faith for your future, a tough situation where you had more doubt than faith etc.)

START SHARING

1. Read Philippians 4:6-8. This is a verse we have referenced often during COVID. What stands out to you most from this amazing verse. Note how God wants to gift us with His peace to guard our hearts and minds. Is this something you have experienced?
2. Is there anything that you have been anxious about? Let's share those things and then put Phil 4 into action - present these things as requests to God and trust for His peace!

START PRAYING

Father, where worldly things govern our hearts, thoughts and actions, we pray that You would stir us to follow you wholeheartedly - not just for today or a season, but for the rest of our lives.

START DOING

Is there a friend, family member or colleague who has drifted from church; or perhaps doesn't have a relationship with God? Commit to praying for them this week, and consider inviting them to church with you sometime soon!

SUMMARY

OF SUNDAY'S MESSAGE

The 'mark of the beast' (Revelation 13:16) has been mentioned a lot during these COVID times. The idea comes from this text in Revelation: *It [the beast] also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.* Revelation 13:15-18.

If you are brand new to faith or the Bible, the book of Revelation can be tricky to understand - there are some pretty intense symbols and visions. This Sunday, Steve dug a little deeper into the scriptures about the mark of the beast and gave some helpful tools for reading and understanding the whole book of Revelation.

The book opens with the following verse: *The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants ...* Revelation 1:1. The word revelation in this verse comes from the Greek word meaning apocalypse. In this context, 'apocalypse' doesn't refer to an event but a style of literature that Jewish readers of that time were familiar with. The books of Daniel and Ezekiel also both include a similar apocalyptic style of literature - full of symbols and visions and metaphorical language. John is writing in the first century BC. (Daniel had written almost identical things 600 years before.)

The book of Revelation was a circular letter, written by John, to seven churches in Asia Minor. And importantly, it was written to Christians who were struggling with persecution (under the Roman Empire) and apathy.

In this letter, one of the things John aims to communicate to these believers (and by extension to us) is the clear view of **two options we have as Christ-followers**:

1. To follow Jesus - the victorious One - with all your heart and share in His victory.
2. OR Follow the enemies of Jesus and share in the suffering of their defeat.

The author also makes two presumptions about the readers of this letter:

1. That they had a VERY good knowledge of the Old Testament and would understand many of the symbols through these lenses e.g. The slain Lamb references Exodus 12 (Passover lamb); The dragon references Genesis 3 (serpent/devil); The beasts reference Daniel 7 (beasts relating to nations).
2. That they had a good knowledge of world history: over the preceding 600 years there were four main empires that ruled the world: Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans

The main symbol for Jesus in the book of Revelation is the slain Lamb, while the symbol for the enemies of Jesus in the book of Revelation is the dragon (the devil) and the beasts. The beasts in Revelation 13 are SYMBOLS for earthly empires, which are driven by military power and economic control, i.e. worldly systems. This has been the case throughout human history.

Back to the aim of John's letter: John is warning the persecuted and apathetic Christians that the beast (worldly systems) demands our allegiance and that Jesus (The Lamb) also demands our allegiance! John uses metaphorical language to explain this. He says the beast (worldly empires) demands allegiance by demanding that the number 666 is on the forehead and hand.

So is this mark and number (666) a literal tattoo/microchip or a metaphor that lines up with the rest of the new Testament?

Three ways in which the early readers would have understood this:

1. The mark of the beast is in direct contrast to the mark of the Lamb

Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 (12 x 12 - which is also a number representing perfection) who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. Revelation 14:1

Now we know that when we follow Christ, we don't receive a literal mark on our forehead. This is a metaphor that shouts, "we belong to Jesus". On the other hand, those who reject Jesus inadvertently follow the 'beast' and the 'dragon', so the beast's mark is a metaphorical reference to those who have rejected Jesus.

2. It's all about our hearts

One of the strongest verses of allegiance to God (known as the Shema) in the Old Testament come from Deuteronomy 6:4-8: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.*

Orthodox Jews would recite this prayer of allegiance to God. The reference to them being written on their foreheads and hands was symbolic of devoting all your thoughts and actions to God. But even more than our thoughts and actions, God is concerned with our hearts (also referenced in the Shema)

So the original Jewish readers would have understood John's words about the mark of the beast on the forehead and hand as being representative of 'anti-Shema' in other words, what ungodly people and nations do by nature.

The nature of the beast (worldly kingdoms) and the devil himself is that we devote our thoughts and actions to things that are not putting God first.

Have you pledged allegiance to God in your heart? Or is your heart tied to the worldly empires and ways of the beast?

3. What about the number '666'?

In the Hebrew and Greek alphabets, letters also have a numeric value, e.g. A = 1 etc. So you can add up the numeric value of certain words and end up with a number.

The letters of the word beast add up to 666. So, incidentally, do the letters of the emperor of that time, Caesar Nero. This is not saying Caesar Nero is the beast, but rather that he represents the worldly nations that demand our total allegiance.

While 666 represents imperfection, God is represented by the number of perfection - 7. And we see references to the number 7 right through the Bible

So, in summary, John is ENCOURAGING Christians not to give up. He is REMINDING us that worldly systems (the beast) demand our allegiance. But these ungodly world systems are facing ultimate ruin and destruction. Jesus (The Lamb) has triumphed over the 'beast' and has purchased our freedom from worldly systems with His blood.

We have a CHOICE to make:

Before we became believers, the number 666 was written on our hearts because we did things in worldly ways. But Christ came in and rescued us, and we have certainty of victory in our salvation. His mark is stamped permanently on our hearts and replaces the other marks of doing things our own way.

If we refuse to follow Christ, we have already taken on the mark of the beast - rejection of God is a symbolic '666'. But if we choose to follow the Lamb with all of our heart, we get His sign on our 'foreheads' - that we are His!

Keep following the Lamb. He is the ultimate Victor, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and He wins in the end!