

Whose Mark?

I thought I had a couple of extra weeks to work on this message. Mike French was supposed to be preaching this morning, but he called Tuesday night to say he had tested positive for covid when he returned from South Korea and so we will reschedule and that means I'm preaching. Turn to Revelation 13 as we prepare to take a look at a subject that has captured the attention and fascination of believers and nonbelievers alike for the past 2,000 years. As you do, let me just quickly give some context to the last two messages I shared from chapter 13: See Above and Who Is Like the Beast? Those two messages show the dragon (the devil) the beast (the anti-christ), this beastly empire coming against God, making war against God's people and prevailing at times. To properly view Revelation 13 where the dragon and the beasts have authority and power and are making war and conquering and ruling the nations and causing all the inhabitants of the earth to worship the beast, you have to look back and remember what John saw in Revelation 4 and 5. If you just read Revelation 13 and then you view the world and the economy and political power and the future through that lens, you lose hope. John has already described the heavenly reality that informs and emboldens us. Our God is on his throne. He rules and reigns and someday everyone and everything will ascribe honor and glory to him. John writes, **"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them singing, 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power for ever and ever!'"** Revelation 5:13 Don't let Revelation 13 frighten you. It's not over yet and Jesus and his saints win!

As I said last week, Revelation is about opposing kingdoms, the kingdom of this world, this beastly empire led by Satan and his henchmen warring against the kingdom of God and his Christ, the Savior of the world. In every generation the challenge is going to be presented to the people of God: Will we serve God or will we serve the empire and the beast? It seems only natural that allegiance to a king and his kingdom, whichever kingdom we choose, will make its mark upon us, upon our lives, our thoughts, our actions and behavior, our values, our understanding, everything. **The question then is whose mark will we bear?** The mark of the beast or the mark of God?

Before we answer that question, let's look at the text. It's only in Revelation we hear about the mark of the beast. John writes, **"He [the beast] also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead,**

so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666." Revelation 13:16-18

Notice the mark is the name of the beast. He puts his name on you. It shows possession, ownership, control. Then continuing in chapter 14.

"If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." Then in chapter 20.

"And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years." Revelation 20:4

The source of the mark is in fact the beast. He marks those who worship him, but the mark of the beast is not the only mark found in Revelation or in the bible. In Deuteronomy 6 God gave Moses what we could easily call the foundation of the Jewish religion, the Shema Yisrael. **"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 upon 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. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:4-9** Notice verse 8, "tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." Orthodox Jews call this "tefillin". Two leather boxes containing Scripture written on parchment with leather straps that are wrapped around the arm and hand and upon the forehead. They do this every day except for Sabbath and Holy Days. Wearing tefillin you are literally marked on the hand and forehead by the word of God, his law, his commandments. It's a symbol of allegiance to God and his word, a physical reminder that God's word controls their thoughts (forehead) and actions (hands). It marked them as belonging to God.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a man who was told, **“Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it...”** Then others were told to put to death all those in the city **“...but do not touch anyone who has the mark.”** Ezekiel 9:4,6. The mark on their forehead was a sign, a symbol of their allegiance to God and his word. They belonged to God.

In Revelation 7 instruction is given not to harm the land or the sea **“until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.”** Revelation 7:3 In chapter 14 John writes, **“I looked and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.”** Revelation 14:1 A seal, a mark, the Lamb’s name and the Father’s name placed on the servants of God. Again, a symbol of their allegiance to God and his word, a mark of their commitment and a mark that shows possession. They belong to God.

But what about all of us? How do we get the mark? The good news is, we’ve already got it. Paul writes, **“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.”** Ephesians 1:13-14 We’ve been marked by God, by his Holy Spirit. We belong to him. We are God’s possession, bought with a price. He put a deposit down on us and will come to claim us. His mark on us should be apparent to those around us -- our thoughts are different (forehead) and our actions are different (hand). We belong to God, marked and sealed by his Spirit. His imaged stamped on our heart.

But what about the mark of the beast? Could we accidentally take the mark and be condemned? It’s a computer chip isn’t it? Let’s talk about that for a moment. The way we portrayed the mark of the beast in the last 100 years looks something like this. A world leader will arise that negotiates peace and brings prosperity. He forms a one-world government with one currency. To simplify business transactions and commerce and further unite the world, everyone will be given a computerized chip inserted in the forehead or right hand. You won’t be able to buy or sell without this identifying mark which is this computer chip. Obviously, if you can’t buy groceries you can’t eat. You can’t do business. Revelation 20 indicates you eventually might get your head cut off if you refuse to take the mark of the beast. We’ve all heard how technology has made this possible, how people are already being given the chip somewhere.

Conspiracy theorists warned us the covid vaccine was how they were going to get the chip into us. I'm pretty sure they weren't giving those shots in the forehead or the right hand, but you can't argue with a good conspiracy theorist.

It very well could be just as I've presented and as many of us have been taught over the years. However, a couple of things to consider. First, it's interesting we take so much of Revelation as figurative and then suddenly we make the mark of the beast a literal, physical mark on the forehead and hand. The beast with ten horns and seven heads isn't literal, but the mark is and furthermore, we know for sure it's a computer chip. Also, that means the mark of the beast is only applicable to us in this generation. Obviously computer chips and technology didn't exist in the 1st century, but the church understood and could apply John's revelation to their circumstances. The mark was a symbol they understood. As followers of Christ they were already being affected in their ability to buy and sell. The job market and trade unions were tied to pagan religion and one's allegiance to the Emperor and the empire and idols. You had to give allegiance to the gods that prospered your particular trade. If not, you didn't work. Refusing allegiance to idols, to the Emperor meant isolation, restriction, persecution, eventually death.

N. T. Wright in his commentary on Revelation writes, "What's more, worshipping or not worshipping was quickly becoming the dividing line between people who were acceptable in the community and people who weren't. Not long after this time, some local officials introduced a formal requirement that unless you had offered the required sacrifices you weren't allowed in the market. There were various kinds of marks and visible signs which were used to set people apart either as 'able to trade' or as 'not able to trade.' From quite early on the Christians were faced with a stark alternative: stay true to the lamb and risk losing your livelihood, the ability to sell or buy; or capitulate to the monster, sacrifice to Caesar at the behest of the local officials, and then everything will be all right – except your integrity as one of the lamb's followers." N. T. Wright

The mark was and is and will be a dividing line. Allegiance to the beast or to Christ is a dividing line with consequences, then, now and always. We may not be denied access to the neighborhood market right now, but Christians in America are often being denied access in the marketplace of ideas. Christian universities and Christian professors are being marginalized and silenced, refused tenure or publications denied. Advancement on jobs may be limited because of

your stance as a believer, your biblical values questioned. The question is always before us: whose mark will I bear, that of the Lamb or that of the beast?

John tells us the mark is the number of his name. “If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.” John apparently is speaking of gematria, an ancient practice of adding up the numerical values of the letters in a word. (Graffiti found in Pompeii: I love her whose number is 545). Caesar Nero apparently adds up to 666. Through the centuries the number pointed to various popes and world leaders. If the first century Christians calculated the number 666 to mean Caesar Nero, I think it’s fair to say the Scripture is telling us “Beware, it’s Nero all over again.” Again, it’s a warning of an empire, a system, a leader that will stand in opposition to God and his laws and commandments. Whether we figure out his name, we must not surrender our allegiance to that beast or his empire.

John said 666 is “man’s number.” Some scholars point out that God created man on the sixth day so the number 666 is a kind of human trinity. It is symbolic of humanity depending on ourselves, allegiance given not to God but to self, or given to the beast and the anti-christ. It feels like the temptation presented to Eve in the garden – “You’ll be like God. You’ll be gods.” The mark of the beast becomes a symbol of choosing the mark of the world, the ways of the dragon, allegiance to the world and its evil systems, allegiance to self, worshiping and glorifying man rather than glorifying God the creator. I don’t know if it involves computer chips, but I can definitely say it is about allegiance.

We are either marked by the beast or marked by the Holy Spirit. I think the mark of the beast may look less like a stamp on your hand or a chip in your forehead and more like what Paul described in Romans 1. **“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator...they have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not**

only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them.”

Romans 1:21-32

There's a mark of the beast for you! You are marked by the beast when you reject God, when you refuse his salvation, willfully sin against him, exchange God's truth for a lie, serve yourself and give your allegiance to sin rather than to God, when you choose evil over God's word and God's way, I say you are marked by the beast.

I find it fascinating that people who aren't followers of Jesus, who have no problem with lying, stealing, cheating on their spouse, sexually immoral, living with someone outside of marriage, "faithless, heartless and ruthless" as Paul said, but they didn't want to take the vaccine because they were afraid they might get the mark of the beast. They sure didn't want that. They've already got the mark!! Don't you see, it's not about a chip, it's about allegiance, it's about ownership, it's about surrender.

Whose mark will you bear? John writes, **"This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother." 1 John 3:10**

In his book on the end times, Daniel Isgrigg writes, **"The biblical sign of ownership is one's actions. Those who belong to God will obey God and love their neighbor. Those who belong to the devil will live a life of sin. The New Testament is very clear that what you do and what you think are the litmus tests for determining to whom you belong. What this famous passage about the mark is teaching is that people have one of two marks: the mark of God or the mark of the beast. This worship is not given by accident. People choose the mark that they have...Jesus said that if you do not believe in him, you are 'condemned already' (John 3:18). No additional microchips, credit cards or any other technology will change that fact. Christians need not fear technology or geo-political situations that lead to mass systems of identification. Spiritually we are already identified." ...Daniel Isgrigg**

If your faith is in Jesus, if you have repented of your sins and committed your life to Christ, you don't have to live in fear of accidentally taking the mark of the beast. You're already sealed and marked by Jesus, by His Holy Spirit. There should be evidence of the mark of the Holy Spirit in your life. A redeemed life, a renewed mind, choosing to walk in holiness and in obedience to God. There should be evidence of Jesus' mark on your life. Paul calls it the fruit of

the Spirit, the evidence of His mark. “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Galatians 5:22

Everyone is going to be marked. Whose mark will you choose? To whom will you give your allegiance. John writes, “**This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.**” **Revelations 14:12.** If you literally are denied access to buy and sell because you are a Christian and have the mark of the Lamb on your life, will you remain faithful to Jesus? Will you still choose to serve Jesus if your life is on the line? If your job is on the line? If your reputation, your acceptance by others, your position and popularity are on the line? Choosing to bear his mark means taking up your cross and following Jesus! The next verse in Revelation 14 says, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” Following Jesus, bearing his mark, giving him our allegiance, it’s all in. It means dying to self and maybe someday physically dying for him if necessary, but it is worth it all! Whose mark will you bear? Let’s bear the mark of the Lamb, the mark of Jesus!