
The Mark of the Beast

The mark of the beast, in Revelation 13:18 is 666. According to that verse, it is not only the mark of the beast; it is also the number of a man. Many have speculated about this number and what it means exactly. Some have said that it refers to Emperor Nero, the letters of whose name, using a kind of numerology, total up to 666. This is unlikely, for Nero had died more than 40 years before John saw his revelation.

A more likely interpretation of this number is to notice that it falls short. The number, 7, is a number of completeness in the Bible. It is often associated with the things of God (e.g. seven spirits in Revelation), and thus, the number, 6, is a number which depicts something that is not complete, not whole. The threefold use of “6” indicates a great falling short of wholeness and completeness.

In Revelation 13:16-17 we are told that the second beast, whose number is 666, (more about the first beast in a moment) forced everyone to take its mark on their right hand or forehead, and if they did not, they would not be able to buy or sell, meaning that unless they bowed to the beast, they would not engage in business or even buy groceries for this family. It is understandable that reading a statement like this would raise alarm among Christians who would refuse to receive the mark of the beast. Many have asked how Christians will live if this becomes a reality.

Reading only Revelation 13 might raise in us feelings of dread, but we cannot read one chapter without considering the context of the rest of the book. This is not the first time that a mark placed on human beings is mentioned, and we need to go back to Revelation 7 to discover the first time. There in Revelation 7 we learn that God places a mark on those who are his, sealing them as his own. True, a narrow and literal understanding of Revelation 7 would lead us believe that those who are sealed are the 144,000 Jewish men (12,000 from every tribe of Israel), but scholars who have studied apocalyptic writing such as Revelation teach us that the number, 144,000 comes from the multiplication of numbers of wholeness (12x12x1000). This is the full contingent of all who belong to the Lord.

What we discover in Revelation 7, further, is that those standing before the throne of God will never again hunger or thirst, but rather, the Lamb will lead them to springs of living water.” We cannot help but see the parallel between Revelation 7 and 13, for both have to do with being supplied with the essentials of life. However, there is a significant difference: in Revelation 7, it is Jesus who supplies his people with life-giving food and water while in Revelation 13, those who have the mark of the beast have to have money to buy and sell, essentially providing for themselves in ways common to how this world operates. In other words, those who receive the mark of the beast live in a less-than-perfect situation (a 666 situation where nothing is complete) while those who belong to Jesus experience fullness (a 777 situation).

This contrast between incompleteness and wholeness is made more clear by the beasts as they are compared to the Lamb. In Revelation 5 we read that the Lamb who was Slain, Jesus, has the authority to open the scroll of history, thus having the authority to shape and direct the entire course of human history. We find this Lamb in heaven, before the throne of God the Father. In sharp contrast, in Revelation 13, we see an ugly beast coming up out of the sea (the place most distant from heaven, a place of great chaos),

and that ugly beast also has a wound from which he had recovered (compare that to the lamb who was slain), and that beast is supported by the dragon, a terrible reconfiguration of the serpent found in Genesis 3. Many have said that the first beast represents the powerful empires of the world, empires which say they can provide salvation but the salvation they provide is substandard and ineffective. The second beast, whose number is 666, many believe, represents the religious powers that support the activities of the first beast. In other words, it takes two beasts to do the work of one Lamb who is both king and priest.

We could spend a lot more time thinking about the symbolism and its meaning in the book of Revelation, but we have enough to draw a conclusion: all that the devil can do is nothing more than a very bad and incomplete facsimile of what Jesus has come to do. Again, the devil needs two beasts (one injured and seemingly come back to life) to try to copy the work of the one Lamb who was slain but is now alive again, resurrected from the dead. The devil grants the ability to live to those who follow him, but he is not able to provide, and those who follow him must use their own money to survive. The Lamb, on the other hand, provides completely for those who put their trust in him.

But what of the mark of the beast, the thing that so many people fear? It's a bad copy, and it has no real benefits. True, the devil might try to destroy the lives of God's people by withholding from them the essentials of life, but we must never forget that those who belong to Jesus are marked for eternity and cannot be destroyed. It is important to realize, of course, that Revelation 7 is a scene from heaven where those who have suffered on this earth can now be found before the throne of God. We can take this to mean that those who belong to Jesus might well be persecuted while on this earth, but we must also understand that there awaits a glorious eternal life with Jesus that will last for eternity. To put it another way, the devil might be able to give those who belong to him an opportunity to get ahead in this world, but that is all they will get. Those who belong to Jesus are marked (guaranteed) for eternal life. For all who belong to Jesus, we need not fear the mark of the beast, for we are marked with the mark of God. And that is enough, isn't it?

Pastor Gary