

## "Mark of the Beast"

Have you ever wondered what the Bible says about the mark of the beast. Hello, I'm Phil Sanders, and this is a Bible study "In Search of the Lord's Way." And today we're going to explore the book of Revelation, and what it says about the mark of the beast. Stay tuned.

Welcome to In Search of the Lord's Way! We're here to search the Scriptures for God's will. The Bible is a marvelous book with many wonderful promises. It teaches us everything that we need to know about God, and it does it through the law, through narratives, through poetry, through epistles, and through prophecy. The Bible is a wonderful library of books with many types of literature. The book of Revelation is prophetic but it's written in a style called apocalyptic literature. And understanding the nature of the book helps answer many questions about the symbols found there. So thanks for taking time with us today. We want to be a part of your life each week.

Apocalyptic literature grew out of a need for Jews to encourage one another during very difficult times. And it usually tells the story of how things will go from bad to worse for the people of God, but how God intervenes to deliver his people. These are messages of hope for hard times that included a prophecy of persecution and sometimes death. Now on the surface they appear innocent but sometimes fanciful, but underneath they contain a valuable and meaningful message of hope.

The book of Revelation also tells of God's ultimate victory over the enemies of the church in the book of Revelation 17 and verse 14. It says, "They will make war on the Lamb (that is Jesus), and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful." Now as we study the book of Revelation, we find references to a dragon and to beasts. These are symbolic references to the enemies of Jesus.

Now if you want to study more, we offer this study free. And if you'd like a printed copy or a CD of our study and live in the United States, mail your request to In Search of the Lord's Way, P.O. Box 371, Edmond, OK 73083 or send an e-mail to [searchtv@searchtv.org](mailto:searchtv@searchtv.org). Or you can call our toll-free telephone number. That number is 1-800-321-8633. We also have materials free online [www.searchtv.org](http://www.searchtv.org). The Edmond church will now worship in song, and we'll read from Revelation 1:1 to 3, and then we'll explore the topic, the mark of the beast.

Our reading today comes from the book of Revelation, the revelation of Jesus Christ to John, chapter 1, verses 1 through 3. "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must shortly take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near." That's a reading from God's holy word. Let's pray together. Father we're so grateful for Your love and we're thankful for the joy that we have in Christ. And Father as we think about the words of Your Bible, the words from the book of Revelation, help us to read them and to understand them so we may be blessed by them. And may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus name, Amen!

The use of apocalyptic literature was actually common among Jews in the centuries prior to the writing of the book of Revelation. Some believe there is some deep, dark secret behind every detail. Frankly, those who hold the futurist interpretation of Revelation have fostered this notion by associating hard-to-understand passages with twenty-first century events. Well using the book to predict the events of this century shows little attention to what the book has to say for itself. Many

hold to the futurist view of Revelation but have never investigated the background of the book itself. Your study of the background will bring you great encouragement from this book.

Apocalyptic literature uses symbols. At the beginning of the book of Revelation, the Bible says that the Lord Jesus “communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.” Now the Greek word for “communicated” means to make a message known by some sort of sign or figure, and that shows the symbolic character of the book. And this should warn the reader not to expect a literal presentation of future history but a symbolic portrayal of that which “must soon take place.”

Verse 4 says the book of Revelation addressed and spoke specifically to the needs of the seven churches in Asia of the first century. He told them what they faced, things which “must soon take place” (verse 1), “for the time is at hand” (verse 3). Now this helps us understand what the book would have meant to them at that time. To interpret the book futuristically, saying it’s addressing twenty-first century America, robs us of being able to understand the book as the Lord delivered it. Unfortunately, much of what futurists today are saying the book of Revelation teaches is simply their fanciful speculations.

Well why is the book of Revelation symbolic? Well apocalyptic literature uses “code” communication. In difficult times of war or persecution, the Jews used figurative codes to communicate things that they understood among themselves but the enemy or persecutors couldn’t understand. John, as a Jewish Christian, used this means to communicate to his brethren in the seven churches of Asia. Now if the persecutors found the apocalyptic message, they wouldn’t be able to understand it. This would help ensure safety for the people of God.

Now objects and numbers in apocalyptic literature are often symbolic, not literal. Revelation itself gives us a clue to many of these: stars are angels, lamps are spirits, the dragon is Satan, horns are kings or powers, and heads are mountains, and the Woman is the Great City. One as a number, is that number of unity, two of strength, three of deity, four of the world, and five of perfection (five fingers and toes), six of sin, seven of perfection, ten of completeness, and twelve of the organized people of God. Now multiples indicate intensity, and since ten refers to completeness, the number thousand encompasses all. A myriad was an unlimited number. These symbols help us to see how the book should be understood figuratively and not always literally.

In chapter twelve Revelation introduces us to the devil who hates the people of God and wants to destroy them. In chapter thirteen, we’re introduced to the beast who has power from the dragon (the devil) to make war on Christians. Revelation 13 verses 4 to 8 says, “And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also, it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. Authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all who dwell on the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.”

Well what is this about? Well Rome was not only the center of government and wealth in its day, it was also a headquarters for religion. Most of the people believed in the existence of pagan gods; but their confidence was shaken when their gods failed to help them, so paganism was breaking down. Christianity, on the other hand, at the latter part of the first century was growing fast. And this was a

challenge to Rome, because Roman law said the emperor was divine. Domitian, who reigned from 81 to 96 AD was the Roman emperor when the book of Revelation was written. He demanded to be worshipped and to be called "Lord and God." He was very power hungry to control the Senate, and the people, and the army.

And for Christians worshipping a man was idolatrous and a denial of their faith in Christ Jesus. To the Romans the refusal to worship the emperor was an act of treason. Emperor worship was forced upon the Christians as a test of their loyalty to the State. And at first Christians were called upon to perform the ceremonies of loyal service and worship to the emperor—the placing of a pinch of incense upon the altar. And to refuse that was treason; now to agree was to prove that one was not a Christian. Many Christians saw this act as meaningless, so they performed it to escape punishment; but they were denying their faith. As the demand for emperor worship grew, Christians became guilty as criminals.

Now the emperor appointed an official body known as the praefectus urbi for the enforcing of worship in each town. These were responsible for punishing people in various cities over a province. The group with the greatest authority was the concilia, composed of deputies sent from the various towns or divisions of a province. And their duty was to build images of the emperor and sponsor the state religion. They forced the people to worship the emperor. When people refused to worship the emperor, they identified and punished them in various ways.

Revelation chapter 13 speaks of two beasts. The purpose of the second beast was to empower the first beast. Verses 15 to 18 say, "And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. Also it causes all, both great and small, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand and on the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. (And then he says) this calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666."

Many Christians refused to worship the emperor and were beheaded, exiled, or lost all their property. Some were tortured until they confessed "Lord Caesar." One of the reasons this punishment fell heavy in Asia Minor is because this was a major stronghold of Christianity after 70 A.D. And all this helps us to better understand and appreciate the encouragement the book of Revelation gives to the seven churches of Asia.

Now Revelation shows that even so great a power as Rome was doomed to be overthrown. In the end the kingdom of God would triumph, and Christ will reign supreme. Revelation presents a ringing call to maintain loyalty to the faith at all costs, even in the face of martyrdom. The Lord Jesus told the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2 and verse 10, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life."

Well what then, is the mark of the beast? Well the book of Revelation describes a time when everyone, including Christians, were commanded to worship the Roman emperor, who claimed to be a god. Now offering a sacrifice to the emperor and calling him "Lord" were considered patriotic gestures as well as religious ones, and those who refused were suspect, considered disloyal, or even traitors. Undoubtedly, the Romans identified those who had complied with the order. They probably gave those who made the required sacrifice a certificate, and only those who could show the certificate were allowed to buy or sell or conduct business.

The mark is said to be placed “on their right hand and on their foreheads.” Perhaps that only signifies “in a conspicuous place.” Or it may reflect a comparison with the Jewish custom of wearing phylacteries. Moses had commanded concerning the words of the law, “that you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 6 and verse 8). Of the Pharisees, Jesus said, “They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments” (Matthew 23 and verse 5). And so it was fairly common at least for Jews to wear a “mark” that indicated their relationship to God. The “mark of the beast” would stand in contrast to that.

Revelation 13 verse 18 says, “Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six” (666). Now many students of Revelation believe this beast is Nero and that 666 is one of the indicators of that. Nero was the first of the Roman emperors known to be involved in persecuting the church. Nero’s persecution seems to have been confined to Rome itself and it’s difficult to find evidence that it was extended vigorously into the provinces, such as Asia, to whom Revelation is addressed. Now due to its ferocity and violence, however, it continues to be remembered with horror, and the man himself was “beastly” enough for the figure to fit.

There was also a popular myth that Nero would be revived and that he, and that at least another emperor would have his same vindictive spirit. Now others believed that he didn’t really die and would later on return with an army to reestablish his reign. Many see a reference to these popular ideas in the fact that the beast from the sea received a “deadly wound” which “was healed” (Revelation 13 verse 3). They assume, then, that Domitian was the revived Nero, who died many years before. And this is a possibility but by no means certain.

Some interpret the number 666 by counting letters as numbers. And they find a word or a person that the letters of their name add up to 666. Now Greek, like other classical languages, has no symbols for numbers, so letters serve that purpose. Some find that the name Nero and others, that their name of Caesar for instance, would add up to 666. And interpreters through the years have suggested hundreds of names that people interpreted as the beast whose number was 666. Well we must realize that identifying this number with one individual is highly speculative.

A better approach for understanding 666 lies in the symbolism of the numbers themselves. As we mentioned earlier, seven in Revelation has the symbolic significance of perfection, completeness or, even, deity. Our text says 666 is the number of the persecuting power, and it’s “the number of a man.” So, seven is the number of deity; but six falls short of seven and refers to the number of humanity.

Seven is the number of perfection; six the number of that which falls short of perfection. Six-hundred-sixty-six may suggest, then, that this beast is not divine and will not successfully complete the task of the destruction of the church. He is not “holy, holy, holy,” as is our God. He is not seven or divine but six and human. He falls short of being the “god” that he claims to be. He is not worthy of worship and will not endure.

Now later chapters in the book of Revelation reveal the fall of Rome and the victory of the Lord Jesus and His saints. Just as the dragon of Revelation 12 was defeated, so Satan and all that follow him will be defeated. The Lord Jesus will overcome because He is King of kings and Lord of lords. My friend, is he your Lord? Whose side are you standing on? Let’s pray together. Oh Father, we are thankful that You have given us Your word to teach us, and Father to help us to understand the difference between good and evil. Help us Father to follow You and to follow the good. And may Your will be done in our lives. In Jesus name, Amen!

We all face choices. While we do not face persecution as the early Christians did, we do decide whether to follow the powers in this world or to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, that's a big decision. We don't have pagan idols or emperor worship, but we still have the challenges of the world. The world still dislikes you and me for loving God. 1 John 2 verses 15 to 17 says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever."

Satan's ultimate agenda is not just to get you to sin but to keep you from worshiping and devoting your life to God. And Satan will use anything to accomplish his purpose. Those who follow Satan will obey him and they'll be enslaved by him. God knows those who belong to Him and those who belong to the world. 2 Timothy 2 verse 19 says, "But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.'"

The promise of the book of Revelation is that those who hold fast to the Lord Jesus will overcome in the end and be blessed. Are you standing with the Lord or with the world? You see your deciding where you will spend eternity. To become a Christian, confess your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, repent of every sin and turn to righteousness, and be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Now when you're baptized, you leave the domain of this world and you come into the kingdom of God.

We hope that today's study about the mark of the beast has stirred you to think about your choices and your soul. Think about what God says. If you live in the United States and you want a free printed copy or a CD of this message, mail your request to In Search of the Lord's Way, P.O. Box 371, Edmond, OK 73083 or send an e-mail to [searchtv@searchtv.org](mailto:searchtv@searchtv.org). Or you can call the Search office toll-free at 1-800-321-8633. Now you can download these lessons or a newsletter online at our website: [www.searchtv.org](http://www.searchtv.org). There's also a schedule of our programs and a map with the location of churches of Christ that are in your area. We also offer free Bible Correspondence courses. Now if you write to us don't worry, we won't put you on a list, we won't beg you for money week after week. We're not here to exploit you, and we're not here to get your money. We're here to help you to get to know God, and to get to heaven.

We do ask that you please get involved with a church of Christ. And if you're looking for a healthy, Biblical church home, we'll be happy to help you find one. We point people to churches of Christ all over the country, and we want you to be a member of the Lord's church, the church of Christ. To be a part of His family, a part of His kingdom, and be with people who love you. Well we'll be back next week, Lord willing. So we ask that you keep searching God's Word with us, that you tell a friend about this program. You probably have got friends that would love to hear more about God's word. Well, God bless you and we love you from all of us at In Search of the Lord's Way.