

People of the Beast

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon. Good evening. Working on the air conditioning, I think. I grew up in a family that loved scary movies. Anybody like scary movies here? Horror movies?

Not so much the kind of bloody, murderous kind, more the supernatural alien kind of horror movies. And so I grew up, you know, many family movie nights at the Henson House where we were watching horror movies.

And even after all the good therapy I've had, one of the things that stands out to me in my memory of those times is how many movies had some reference to the mark of the beast.

Right? The mark of the beast. You know, little Timmy is born with a weird-looking birthmark.

Nobody thinks anything of it until Timmy's play school friends start having accidents, you know, and they start wondering what's wrong with Timmy.

And, you know, I think about the ways that this symbol has just captured the imagination of pop culture. I remember in high school, you know, you could tell the goth kids because they would scribble 666 in the margins of their notebooks at school and some would even get it tattooed on them, you know.

[1 : 12] And so very, very, very much captured popular imagination. You know, it's actually a reference to a Bible passage. The end of Revelation chapter 13 makes reference to the mark of the beast.

And as we've been studying Revelation, one of the things we've seen is this, that Revelation is full of very fantastic, very extraordinary images. A lot of them are drawn from the Old Testament, some are not.

But what we see again and again and again is God uses the extraordinary in Revelation to transform the way we see the ordinary. He uses extraordinary images to get our attention, to wake us up, and to get us to revisit assumptions that we thought were settled, to revisit perspectives that we thought were appropriate.

And He gets us to rethink our lives, our ordinary daily lives, by showing us very extraordinary things. And that's what's happening here. What we're going to do tonight is we're going to look at Revelation, the end of chapter 13, the entirety of chapter 14, and we're going to look at the mark of the beast, the people of the beast.

And we're going to see that this is yet again an example of how Revelation challenges us to rethink our lives and to rethink our faith and what it means to follow Jesus. And I think what we'll see, what I hope you see is what I've seen, that even though this is not the stuff of horror movies, even though the true meaning is very different than what is often portrayed, I think the implications are a lot more frightening.

[2 : 47] And so we're going to look at the mark of the beast, the lie of the beast, and then ultimately the end of the beast, the final end of the beast.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that even when it's not crystal clear, even when it's obscure and mysterious, that in all times when we open Your Word, we are ultimately trusting You through Your Spirit to speak to us.

And we pray that You would do that again this evening as You have always done, and that You would, through Your written Word here, bring us face to face with the living Word, Jesus Christ. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen.

So the mark of the beast, fascinating, right? Let's get a little context of what's happening up to this point in the story. Last week, for those of you who are here, we looked at Revelation 12 and 13, and we saw that between Jesus' first coming, Christmas, and His second coming, which has not happened yet, the two advents of Jesus, that Satan, depicted as a dragon, is going to wage war

against God's people.

And we're in that time. And so in order to wage war against God's people, Satan relies on two beasts, reinforcements.

[4 : 14] There's a beast from the sea and a beast from the land. The beast from the sea represents all of the governments and systems and institutions that are corrupt and wicked and do the work of the dragon.

And then the land beast represents all of the religious institutions and the religious leaders that prop up those wicked institutions and governments and systems.

And so these are both tools in the dragon's hand to wage war against God's people. And what we see at the end of chapter 13, we see all of the people who have given their allegiance to the beast, and we see that they are all marked on their foreheads and on their wrists with the mark of the beast, which we're told is the number 666.

Now, we have to understand that despite what the movies say, this is not a literal mark. This is a symbol. In this context, a mark, to be marked, means your defining characteristic.

It's the thing that you belong to. It's your ultimate loyalty or allegiance. So you might say, you know, somebody is marked by this particular characteristic. So all of the people of the beast are marked with a 666.

[5 : 34] So what is the characteristic that this is conveying? Well, to understand what it means, we have to remember that Revelation is structured in cycles of seven.

Right? So there are seven seals that need to be broken open. There are seven trumpet blasts blown by seven angels. There are seven bowls that need to be poured out on the earth.

And this series of seven is, in each case, meant to hearken back to the first series of seven that appears in the Bible, which is the story of creation, the seven days of creation.

Right? And so in each case, day one corresponds to the number one or the first bowl or the first trumpet. In each case, when we see a number, it's meant to hearken back to that original order of creation, those seven days of creation.

And so when we think about the number six, that immediately brings our minds to the sixth day of creation, which if you remember on the sixth day of creation, that's where God creates all of the creatures of the earth and he creates human beings.

[6 : 44] And then, of course, in the story of creation, day six ends and then everything progresses to the seventh day. And we recognize that the entire purpose of creation is to worship God and to glorify God and to enter into Sabbath rest with God.

And so we recognize that the full story of creation, seven days, it begins with God and it ends with God. And the theological message of that is that all of this is meant for God's glory.

It's meant for seventh day praise and worship. When we see a 666 that is the mark of a person, the defining characteristic of a person, what we're seeing is that that person is defined by the fact that they have, in essence, gotten stuck on the sixth day.

In other words, they got stuck with the world and the creatures of the world and human beings as the end-all-be-all. They are, in a sense, living in denial that there is a seventh day.

They ignore God and the world that he made. They celebrate and worship the creatures, but they have denied the Creator. And this is again and again and again the core issue that the Bible brings to light that is the reason why the world is broken the way it is.

[8 : 01] It's because we have, as Romans chapter 1 says, exchanged the worship of God for the worship of the created things that God has made. And so people who are marked with the mark of the beast, this 666, they live sixth day lifestyles, right?

This is the lifestyle or the attitude that says, you know, it's my money. It's my body. It's my time. And I get to decide what I do with it.

There is no higher purpose. There is no higher source of accountability. I'm not beholden to anyone. I can do whatever I want. That's the sixth day mentality.

That's the mark of the beast. And, you know, this day, these days, I think that's a very attractive worldview. But that entire worldview is built on a lie.

And especially when it comes to the question of what does it mean to be a Christian and how is Christianity different, we recognize that underneath this sits a lie, what we might think of as the lie of the beast.

[9 : 06] Chapter 13, verse 17 says, and this is a really obscure reference. It's easy to just go right past this like you do so many things in Revelation. It's easy to go right by this, but I think it's extremely important.

Verse 17 tells us that only those who wear the mark of the beast are permitted to buy and sell. And you've got to understand that this is actually a historical reference.

In Rome, persecution against Christians was ramping up at the time that this was written. And the reason had partly to do with the fact that the Roman emperor had decreed himself to be a god deserving of worship and that the Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses needed to be worshipped for the benefit of Rome.

And so they would conquer people as the Roman Empire spread and the deal they would make with people was to say, you can continue in your religion as long as you add the emperor and the Roman pantheon to your prayers and as long as you sacrifice to them as well.

Continue in your religion, but also worship the emperor. Also worship the Roman gods and goddesses. And when bad things happened to the Roman Empire, and especially as they began to decline and fall apart, they would blame those bad things on all of the people living in the Roman Empire who refused to sacrifice to the emperor.

[10 : 32] You're not worshipping the emperor, you're not worshipping the gods and goddesses, and we're paying for it. So this was the justification behind the persecution that Christians experienced. And so this persecution included local officials actually beginning to say that people who sacrificed to the emperor would be allowed into the marketplace to sell their wares and to buy what they needed.

People who refused to sacrifice to the emperor were not allowed into the marketplace, and there were various visible means of determining who was allowed in and who was excluded. And so if you were a Christian in this culture, you faced a very real dilemma.

Here's the dilemma. Either I stay true to Jesus, and I only worship him, and I refuse to sacrifice to the emperor, and yet I'm not allowed in the marketplace, I can't sell my goods, I can't get what I need, I can't provide for my family, and I'm putting my very livelihood at risk.

Or, I make a little compromise. I worship Jesus, but I also do a little bit of worshipping of the Roman emperor, just enough to count, just enough to qualify.

I get my permit, I go to the market, I get what I need, I sell my stuff, I make the money, I provide for my family, I make sure they're okay. Surely God would understand, I want to provide for my family, I want to feed my kids.

[11 : 57] Surely God understands a little compromise. Surely Jesus is reasonable. And this was the dilemma. And you know, this is a very real dilemma. It's something that Christians have had to wrestle with all throughout history.

How do we make these challenging decisions of loyalty? You know, do you work for a company, and do very benign gospel kingdom work, while knowing that a subsidiary of that company is making weapons, or is doing things that are deeply harmful to the environment?

And how do you square that as a Christian? Do you support a political candidate that either mocks or misrepresents the Christian faith?

Should you even be involved in that as a Christian? You know, do you buy products that you know may come from countries with non-existent labor laws, where you may be propping up unjust systems and the oppression of entire people groups with your consumer choice?

Right? And so as Christians, we have to deal with these kinds of challenging, not-so-clear-cut issues all the time. And yet there is a lie underneath this way of thinking that we need to recognize.

[13 : 16] It's what we might call the lie of the beast. And here's the lie. The lie is this. I can worship Jesus, and I can worship the idols of my culture.

I can have my cake and eat it too. The two do not need to be at odds. This is the lie of the beast. I can worship Jesus and the idols of my culture.

I can worship Jesus, but also I can worship individualism and personal autonomy. I don't need a community. I don't need accountability. I make my own choices. I can worship Jesus, and I can worship consumerism and ultimately allow my life to be defined as a consumer.

I can worship Jesus and sex. I can worship Jesus and money. I can worship Jesus and power. This is the lie that we can follow Jesus and all of these other things.

And what we need to see about the beast is this. The beast does not set out to end religion. Right? We think of the opposite of religion, the opposite of Christian faith, as being atheism.

[14 : 25] That's not the agenda here. The beast does not set out to end religion. The beast sets out to domesticate religion, to domesticate religion, to, as the quote goes, pair the claws of the lion of Judah and turn him into a house cat.

Right? C.S. Lewis wrote the Screwtape Letters, which is about an older demon. He imagines what it would be like for an older demon to coach a younger demon in how to tempt people away from God.

And he says this at one point. If you can once get him, meaning the patient, if you can once get him to the point of thinking that, quote, religion is all very well up to a point, you can feel quite happy about his soul.

And here's the key. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all and more amusing. I love that quote.

A moderated religion is as good for us, meaning the demons, as no religion at all. See, a moderated religion or a domesticated religion, that's a religion that plays nice.

[15 : 34] You know, that's a religion that knows its place at the table and it never crosses the line. You know, that's a religion that knows its place. It's a religion that never wants to rock the boat.

It's a religion that wants to make very sure that it never says or does anything that might in any way offend people, that might in any way call people to question their own choices or their own beliefs. It stays in its box.

It respects the fence. And most important, a domesticated faith is a faith that doesn't ever question the idols of the culture because that would make people angry.

It would make people uncomfortable. It would challenge things. It might upend things. And a domesticated religion does not want that. A domesticated religion just wants everybody to be happy.

No conflict. You know, back in Revelation 3, Jesus confronts the church in Laodicea for being lukewarm. You're neither hot nor cold.

[16 : 34] You're lukewarm and therefore I will spit you out of my mouth. Lukewarmness is the work of the beast. That's exactly what we see here. And you know, I've been thinking about this a lot this week and I think the biggest threat to my faith, you know, the biggest risk is not that I would one day just stand up here and say, I reject God.

I reject Jesus. I don't believe any of it anymore. That's probably not going to happen. What's much more likely is that instead of one big cataclysmic rejection is that over time, instead of denying Jesus, I would slowly domesticate Jesus in my own life.

I would want to trim away all of the parts I don't like. I would want to cut away all the things that offend me or the things that mean I might not get along with my friend at work. I want to trim away all of the things that make me in any way uncomfortable or put me at any way in odds with the people around me.

And I make it nice and neat and I put it in a little box and I put it in the closet and then it's there if I need it. That's what I'm afraid might happen to me. You know, that I would get to the point where I say, you know, I'll follow Jesus as long as it doesn't inconvenience me too much, as long as it doesn't throw off my routine, as long as it doesn't mean I have to change the way I live, as long as it doesn't mean that I have to shift in my pursuit of success or pleasure because surely God understands why these things matter to me.

Surely God's on board with my agenda. I'll follow Jesus as long as it doesn't cost me anything socially because God wants me to have friends. God doesn't want me to be rejected. God wants me to be happy.

[18 : 18] As long as I don't have to share my faith with anybody because surely God understands that people just don't do that anymore. And I live in a society where it's okay to believe what you want as long as you keep it to yourself and you should never impose your beliefs on another people.

And, you know, we all hate the idea of the kind of imperial expansion and colonialism of the, you know, and we just think, you know, surely God understands that. Surely God understands if I just keep it hidden because really it's just about me and Him.

You know, the mark of the beast sounds like the stuff of horror movies, but I think the truth is much worse because people of the beast are not wearing 666's and they're tattooed into their skin and going out and killing people like monsters.

People of the beast are benign. You know, they're docile. They're passive. They're submissive. People of the beast would never take a public stand for their faith. People of the beast would never speak truth to power. People of the beast would never push back against dehumanizing systems or institutions.

[19 : 31] They would never liberate the oppressed. People of the beast would never, ever, ever start a revolution. They just want to get through the day. And this is why we need Revelation chapter 14 which lands like a bombshell and wakes us up.

You know, there are those places in Scripture that just sort of jerk you awake. And that's what Revelation does. It shakes us awake. And it says, do you realize the truth of the situation? And John in 14 tears his eyes away from the beast and the people of the beast and the mark of the beast and he looks up and he sees an entirely different vision. It says in verse 1, then I looked and behold on Mount Zion stood the Lamb and with him 144,000 which represents the totality of the true Israel.

All of God's people who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads. John looks and he sees a whole other company of people.

And they're standing on the mountain of God and they're standing with the Son of God, the Lamb, Jesus Christ. And they also bear a mark but it's not the mark of the beast. It's the mark of the Lamb.

[20 : 45] The name of God the Father is written on their foreheads. That's their defining characteristic. That's their family. That's who they belong to. That's who they represent. God the Father. God the Son.

God the Holy Spirit. Embodied in this great company of people. And they're not just standing there either. They are singing together. And it's a song that no one in creation has ever heard before. It's a new song. Which is a way of saying they are representing a new way of being human in the world. A new way of being human. Nobody's ever seen this before.

God created human beings to be image bearers. What does it mean to be an image bearer? Well, to borrow from N.T. Wright, think of it like being an angled mirror. If you're an angled mirror, you're doing two things.

You're reflecting praise and gratitude and thanksgiving up to God for all that He's made. And then you're reflecting God's love and purposes down into the world that you're a part of.

[21 : 52] That's what it means to be an image bearer. And we do this in innumerable ways. Whether you're at home taking care of kids or working a minimum wage job that you hate or working in the career of your dreams, there are countless ways that you are reflecting God's love and purposes into the world through your work.

When we reach out and begin to get to know our neighbors and to build community there, when we recognize needs in our midst and we take that extra time and energy needed to reach out and say, how can I help?

Right? When we do work to try to care for and steward the environment, when we involve ourselves in works of mercy and justice and when we do this in our little corner of the world, right? Not trying to solve every problem, but trying to help the person right next to us with the thing that is weighing them down.

When you do that, you are reflecting God's love and God's purposes into the world. That's what it means to be an image bearer. When you're not doing that, all that's left is to reflect the chaos and the confusion of the world back to itself.

You've lost the angle. The Bible says all human beings have lost that angle. And the reason that Jesus Christ came was to restore that angle, was to restore us to being image bearers.

[23 : 17] And so people of the beast are no longer angled mirrors. They're reflecting chaos and confusion back to itself in an endless feedback loop of futility.

And Jesus came to set those people free. And chapter 4 shows us the ultimate fate of these two groups.

You know, it shows us that all of the people of the Lamb, even though in their lives they were excluded from the marketplace, they were excluded from the promotion opportunities, they were rejected by their friends and neighbors, they were marginalized, they were socially rejected, maybe

even martyred, many were martyred, that they are now being gathered together in this great celebratory harvest.

Jesus is harvesting the saints and they're being gathered together as one for the great wedding feast that is to come in just a little while. On the other hand, all of the people of the beast who decided to compromise, who chose comfort, who chose efficiency, who chose convenience, all of those things, those people who wear the mark and the beast they follow are coming under judgment.

It says in chapter 14, verse 10, And if anyone worships the beast in its image, receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will also drink the wine of God's wrath.

[24 : 52] And you say, well, that's a hard pill to swallow. Nobody likes the idea of judgment. And yet what we recognize is there's still hope for the world. Because in verse 6, it says, Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.

This is saying God has made a way for people who want to be image bearers again, who want to realign themselves with God's love and purposes, who want that mark erased from their body. God has made a way to set those people free. And it's what we call the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Right? Verse 10 says that anyone who worships the beast, anyone who wears that mark, will drink the wine of God's wrath.

There's a cup of wrath waiting for you, which I think needs to bring our minds back to the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus is alone.

He's asked His disciples to pray for Him, to wait on Him, but they've all fallen asleep. And He's alone and He knows He's about to be arrested, tortured, killed. And He prays to the Father and He prays in tears and He sweats drops of blood and He says to His Father, Father, if You're willing, remove this cup from Me.

[26 : 20] Nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done. And we recognize it's the same cup. Same cup. And the gospel tells us that we are all people of the beast.

You know, I ignore God and the world that He made. I live like creation stopped at the sixth day, that there is no more point other than my own personal satisfaction.

I prefer religion that does not get in the way of my autonomy. And what this says is that Jesus Christ knew that about us and yet He was willing to take the cup that was sitting in front of us and to drain it Himself.

And so when we look at the cross, which is the central symbol of our faith, we're also looking at that cup and we're looking at the place where Jesus drained it to the dregs.

And that's why it says in verse 4 that the people of the Lamb are people who have been redeemed. They didn't earn their way into God's favor. They didn't kind of hear a message like this and whip themselves up into a frenzy and say, I need to care more.

[27 : 33] And God said, okay, you have enough passion. Come aboard. These are people who recognized that apart from the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ, they have no hope and they threw themselves at Jesus' feet and they cried out for mercy and Jesus took the cup and He drank it on their behalf.

He purchased their lives and now they belong to Him. And so, you know, I think all of this is meant to wake us up. It's to help us realize that Jesus came to start a revolution.

He came to set people free. He came to restore image bearers in all of the myriad ways that you're doing that right now in the world.

That's why Jesus came. And He came to set people free. And He's calling for people to join the revolution. And in order to join the revolution, we can't will ourselves to care more.

Our hearts have to be broken over our own sin and then they have to be melted down by God's love so that then they can be reformed as something new.

[28 : 43] And from that place of brokenness and from that place of love and grace, that is where we begin to learn how to sing that new song.

Let's pray. Let's pray.