

God's Seal or the Beast's Mark?

One of the most telling signs of God's true last-day people is their proclamation of the third angel's message, which warns against receiving the mark of the beast. However, despite there being no more serious warning in all the Bible, many confusing ideas as to what this mark is have been suggested over the years: a bar code in the forehead, a credit card number, or some biometric identification.

We should not be surprised at the proliferation of confusing ideas in Babylon. After all, its name means "confusion". But God's remnant people need a clear understanding of this topic in order to proclaim the third angel's message with power. This week, we'll try to understand better what the mark of the beast is and how to avoid it — by receiving the seal of God.

God's Sign Identifying His People

In Old Testament times there were two outward signs as identifiers of God's true people. One of them was circumcision. To whom was this sign first given? Gen. 17:9-11.

God commanded Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant of salvation. Males were to be circumcised on the eighth day (Lev. 12:3). However, this ritual had a deeper significance. It was meant to symbolize the need for "circumcision" or renewal of the heart (see Deut. 30:6). That is why Paul writes: "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God" (Rom. 2:28, 29).

Texts such as 1 Corinthians 7:19, Galatians 5:6, and 6:15 show that in the New Testament circumcision is replaced by baptism, which symbolizes conversion, a "new creation", a dying to sin and rising to a new life (see Rom. 6:3, 4). That is why Paul says circumcision is no longer important and that it is "faith working through love" and "keeping the commandments of God" that really matter.

What was the second outward sign that God gave to identify His people, and why was it given? (Exod. 31:13, 17; Ezek. 20:12, 20).

Notice that the Sabbath as a sign goes all the way back to Creation (see also Gen. 2:2, 3) whereas circumcision began only with Abraham. Thus, Jesus said, in referring to Genesis, "the sabbath was made for humankind" (Mark 2:27). It shows that we belong to God, by creation because He made us and by redemption because He justifies and sanctifies us. Thus, though Paul says that circumcision is no longer important, he argues that keeping God's commandments (which includes the Sabbath) still is important (see Heb. 4:9).

The Beast and False Worship

Read the following texts. What do they teach us about how important it is to avoid "the mark of the beast"? Rev. 13:17; 14:9, 10; 16:2.

Receiving the undiluted wrath of God, punished by the seven last plagues, and, in the end, cast into the lake of fire. What a contrast to those who refused the mark of the beast and stand on the sea of glass triumphantly singing praise to God and the Lamb!

What is this mark that no one would want to receive? Clearly, the above verses connect it with false worship. Also, as we saw in a previous lesson, the fourth beast power of Daniel

7, in its latter phase (also depicted as the sea beast of Revelation 13), would “think to change times and laws” (Dan. 7:25). One law that it thought to change was the Sabbath, the fourth commandment — the only one of the ten that refers to time and points directly to God as the One who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day” (Exod. 20:11).

Significantly, the first angel’s message points us back to this commandment that the beast power tried to change and makes it clear that we are to worship the Lord alone as the Creator. In fact, of the seven verses referring to worship in Revelation 12-14, this (14:7) is the only one about true worship; the other six warn against falsely worshiping the beast and his image (Rev. 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11). Immediately after the third angel’s description of the fate of those who engage in this false worship, the true worshipers of God are described: “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12).

In other words, proclamation of these three messages separates all of humanity into two groups: those who worship the Creator by keeping all of His commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath command, and those who worship the beast and his image. This false form of worship, then, offers an alternative to worshiping the Creator by keeping the Sabbath commandment.

The Seal of God

A seal, like a signature, is used to validate a document. In ancient times it was a stamp pressed onto soft wax or clay to show authenticity or ownership, having the authority of its owner behind it.

What is the seal of God, and how and when is it given? Eph. 1:13, 14; 4:30; 2 Tim. 2:19; Rev. 7:1-4; 14:1.

The seal of God is a sign of God’s ownership and protection of His people. Paul describes a sealing in connection with conversion and reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. He calls this gift a “deposit” or “down payment” given to all believers as an assurance of the complete redemption and future inheritance they will receive when Jesus comes.

The book of Revelation pictures another sealing just prior to the second advent. This final seal is given to the 144,000 at the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain. They have God’s name (or signature) written in their foreheads. Through the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives, they come to reflect God’s character.

Contrast the seal of God with the mark of the beast. What differences between them are mentioned? Rev. 7:3, 14:9.

The seal is given to true worshipers of God while the mark is given to worshipers of the beast. The seal is given only in the forehead, indicating a definite choice of the mind to worship God in the way that He has commanded. The mark, on the other hand, is given either in the forehead or in the hand. This means that people may worship the beast for one of two reasons. Either in their minds they agree with it, thinking that they are truly worshiping God, or else they don’t agree with it but they go along because they are afraid of the serious consequences of not conforming: being unable to buy or sell and eventually being killed (Rev. 13:17, 15).

“Those who are uniting with the world are receiving the worldly mold and preparing for the mark of the beast. Those who are distrustful of self, who are humbling themselves before God and purifying their souls by obeying the truth — these are receiving the heavenly mold and preparing for the seal of God in their foreheads”. — Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5, p. 216.

The Mark of the Beast

What is this mark that we need to avoid getting? As we saw in an earlier lesson, the fourth beast power of Daniel 7, in its latter phase (also depicted by the sea beast of Revelation 13), would “think to change times and laws” (Dan. 7:25). As we have seen already, one law that it thought to change was the Sabbath, the fourth commandment, the only commandment that points directly to God as the One who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day” (Exod. 20:11).

Meanwhile, the first angel’s message — pointing the reader back to this same commandment, one that the beast power tried to change — makes it clear that we are to worship the Lord alone as the Creator. Then, after a warning about the fate of those who instead worship the “beast and his image” (Rev. 14:9), God’s faithful people are depicted in verse 12.

Read Revelation 14:12. Given the immediate context, how does this depiction of God’s faithful people help us understand why the Sabbath is so central to final events?

The text reads: “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12). As we have seen, included in “the commandments of God” is the fourth commandment, the Sabbath, which points to God as the Creator and the one who alone should be worshiped. No wonder, then, that many see the issue of “the mark of the beast” as being directly tied to the question of Sunday worship, a counterfeit “sabbath” that is not commanded in the Bible, as opposed to keeping the fourth commandment, which is commanded in the Bible.

Does that mean that Christians who worship God on Sunday have the mark of the beast now? No. According to Revelation 13:15, those who refuse to join in this false worship of the beast will be killed. It will eventually become a life-or-death issue. Obviously, though, events have not yet reached that point, and the mark of the beast will not be given until this final test does come. Therefore, no one has yet received the mark of the beast.

The Sabbath as the Seal

As we have seen, the seventh-day Sabbath has been a sign of God’s true people throughout history, beginning with Adam and Eve and continuing during the time of Israel. We also see it perpetuated in the New Testament church with the practice of Jesus and the apostles, and as a distinguishing sign of God’s last-day people who “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12).

Why is the Sabbath so important, and what special significance does it have for Christians? Exod. 20:8-11; Heb. 4:9, 10.

The Sabbath appears in the heart of the Ten Commandments. It was given by the Creator as a sign or seal of His authority. It identifies Him by name, “The LORD your God”. It identifies the realm over which He has jurisdiction, “the heavens and the earth, the sea,

and all that is in them". It also identifies the basis of His authority, "for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, . . . and rested the seventh day".

The New Testament identifies Jesus as the One through whom God made all things (John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:1, 2). It is Jesus who created our world in six days and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, it is highly significant that as Jesus hung on the cross that Friday afternoon, He cried out, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Just as He rested on the Sabbath after finishing His work of Creation, so Jesus rested in the tomb over the Sabbath after finishing His sacrificial work by dying in our place for our redemption. So, the Sabbath is doubly blessed, first at Creation and then at the cross. That is why, according to the book of Hebrews, in resting on the Sabbath the Christian shows that he "has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His" (Heb. 4:10). The Sabbath is a perfect symbol of the fact that we cannot save ourselves, that from start to finish it is Christ's work made possible through faith (compare Heb. 12:2).

Further Thought:

"Just as soon as the people of God are sealed in their foreheads — it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved — just as soon as God's people are sealed and prepared for the shaking, it will come. Indeed, it has begun already; the judgments of God are now upon the land, . . . that we may know what is coming". — Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 285.

"The Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty, for it is the point of truth especially controverted. When the final test shall be brought to bear upon men, then the line of distinction will be drawn between those who serve God and those who serve Him not. While the observance of the false sabbath in compliance with the law of the state, contrary to the fourth commandment, will be an avowal of allegiance to a power that is in opposition to God, the keeping of the true Sabbath, in obedience to God's law, is evidence of loyalty to the Creator. While one class, by accepting the sign of submission to earthly powers, receive the mark of the beast, the other choosing the token of allegiance to divine authority, receive the seal of God". — Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 605.