

Subject Line: Revelation Week Three

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Happy Sunday,

If I had to name what I think the number one challenge is for us when we read Revelation, it would be this: we are not on the same page as the biblical authors about what apocalypse means. When we hear 'apocalypse,' we think about the end of the world. Alex talked a little bit about this during the first week, but in the biblical imagination, 'apocalypse' is more like a massive paradigm shift. An apocalypse is what happens when someone is exposed to the transcendent reality of God's perspective; it is a confrontation with the divine so intense that it transforms how a person views everything!

So, in a sense, an apocalypse might be *the end of our current understanding of the world*.

Did you know that when Paul thinks back on his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, he calls this an apocalypse? The world didn't end when Paul met Jesus, but it certainly turned his world upside down. In the gospels, the word used when the stone is rolled away from Jesus' tomb is—you guessed it—*apocalypse*. Talk about a paradigm shift! The world didn't end that day, but the resurrection changed everything.

I want to tell you about this because, if you haven't already thought to yourself, "Revelation is so weird," you will this week.

We are about to encounter vision after strange vision with beasts, serpents, angels, and more. Before you embark on this journey, I want to remind you of this truth: Revelation is another apocalypse, and **apocalypse is never a bad thing for you and me**. It isn't an unraveling of everything we hold dear but a reorientation to what is truly good.

Just like the resurrection and Paul's encounter with Jesus, it is always something that God does in our lives to produce good and beautiful results that bring glory to his name and blessings to his people.

If that's what an apocalypse is, then I say bring it on!

And with that, happy reading, friends!

About the Reading

Monday | Revelation 10:1-11

For several chapters, we've been invited to see things as they are from the heavenly perspective, as if John is looking down on the earth from the vantage point of heaven. Now, the angels are descending to the earth, meaning we've returned to the earthly realm.

As for the angel, there's no question where he comes from; he is described with imagery associated with heaven—a shining face, rainbow over his head, pillars of fire for legs (think [Exodus story](#)). In his hand is a scroll. The question you should be asking is what is this scroll? Many scholars think it's the same scroll from ch. 5—the one with seven seals. All this time and we've still not encountered the actual contents of that original scroll. The idea is that we're now finally going to see what the scroll is all about. Why is it small? The other scroll was large, with writing on both sides. Leon Morris argues, "If the present word means a genuinely small book the significance will be that it contained part only of the revelation of God's purpose."

This angel puts one foot on land and the other on the sea, signifying that he has control over both. Later, we'll see that the beast has a hold only on the sea ([Rev. 12:17](#)). The angel calls out, and seven thunders respond—likely letting us know this is God speaking. Being a good student, John wants to jot down notes, but the voice stops him. Whatever the contents of this scroll may be, they are not yet ours to know.

The angel then makes an oath that when the seventh trumpet sounds, there will be no delay; "the Mystery of God" will be fulfilled. This is likely a reference to the [Day of the Lord](#) we've been talking about. The Seventh Trumpet, like the Seventh Seal, and (spoiler alert) the Seventh Bowl all point to the same thing—the ultimate and final judgment day of the Lord.

Leon Morris says, "From the very beginning he has planned to bring his people to salvation, and thus his whole purpose is coming to its culmination. It involves the judgment of evil, but also the deliverance and vindication of his people."

To understand what happens next, we have to take a detour to [Ezekiel 3](#). Seriously, go read this short passage; you will be shocked at how similar the language is to the last half of Revelation 10. Ezekiel was a prophet during the time of the Exile; he was taken captive by Babylon and then given a message of hope and a promise of future restoration for his peers also in captivity.

Both prophets are told to eat their respective scrolls. This is a way of saying ingest the prophetic message, internalize it. The scrolls are said to taste like honey in their mouth; the message is good news.

At the same time, John is warned that the scroll will turn bitter. It's a good message, but it's also difficult to stomach. I love how Marty from the BEMA Podcast paints this picture, drawing on the imagery of Ezekiel and summarizing what God might be saying to John:

"This is a hard calling, and my words are sweet to the taste, but they are hard to hear and digest when you are sitting in the heat of oppression and fear, but go tell them, John. Tell them that I've never forgotten them, tell them what they are fighting for and trying to preserve. What they're doing, tell them, John, it's worth it. Tell them to overcome, tell them to run the race marked out for them."

The chapter ends with John being given a purpose, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." This seems to be John's commissioning again as a prophet.

At this point, we're still waiting for the seventh trumpet to blow, but before that can happen, as NT Wright says, "the churches for whom John is writing need to know where they stand in this great cosmic scenario. Are they after all just spectators, or do they themselves have a particular role to play?"

That's the question we'll tackle tomorrow.

– AJ

Tuesday | Revelation 11:1-14

The next scene opens with John being told to measure the temple. At the point Revelation was written, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed for at least two decades. The Temple in view here, therefore, is God's people (remember Acts?). So, John is taking stock of the church.

The picture is of God numbering the people under his protection, the ones who are sealed. But at the same time, this does not mean that they will escape suffering. John is told not to count the court outside the Temple. This is a tricky passage. Is he talking about outsiders to the church? Is he talking about ethnic Gentiles or people who are spiritually Gentile?

I get the sense it means even though the church will come under attack (be trampled), it will ultimately prevail. If you do the math, 42 months and 1260 days is the same amount of time: three and a half years. These three numbers will show up again and again in Revelation. They represent half of seven (completeness); In Jewish writing, they came to represent a limited period of persecution.

Last week, Elizabeth shared about the Maccabean Revolt, a group of faithful Jews led by Judas Maccabee who heroically retook the Temple after it was desecrated by a Seleucid (Greek) King [Antiochus IV Epiphanes](#). These Jews endured three and a half years of persecution under the Greek Empire before the revolt.

The message God gives John for His people is that they are again going to suffer for a time, but He reminds them not to lose hope because God's people, the Temple, will survive.

The Two Witnesses

John learns there will come two witnesses who, for three and a half years (time of persecution), will prophecy in sackcloth (mourning clothes).

Many different theories have been constructed of the two witnesses of ch. 11. Are these future witnesses that will rise up against the Antichrist? Do they represent the two legal witnesses required by Jewish law to testify to truth? Are they a picture of both Jews and Christians who are now part of God's family? Or are they images from the Old Testament prophets?

We're told the two witnesses are both olive trees and lampstands. In Rev. 1 we found out that a lampstand was a symbol for the church. And [trees were often used as a symbol](#) for people, or for all of Israel. Likely, Revelation here is drawing from multiple OT passages, including [Zech. 4](#), Moses' story, and Elijah's story.

Zechariah takes place when the Jews, led by a man named Zerubbabel, are rebuilding the Temple. Zerubbabel is given a picture of seven lampstands and two olive trees, and God says

to him, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” The word is encouragement that they will finish the task of rebuilding God’s house, but it won’t be because of their own strength, but only through the power of the Spirit.

God is going to protect the church as they come under fire; they won’t survive because of their own might, but because of the Spirit of God in their midst.

There is also a sense that these two witnesses represent two other OT prophets that Jewish tradition believed would return at some point: Moses and Elijah. Elijah was the one who [called down fire from heaven](#) and [took on the prophets of Baal](#) in a contest involving both fire and rain. Turning waters to blood and other plagues are reminiscent of [Moses in Egypt](#). These are the same two figures who showed up on [the Mount of Transfiguration](#) to bear witness to Jesus as the Messiah.

In Revelation, the church has now become the ultimate witness to the kingdom of Jesus through the way they live. Nothing can stop their message from being heard, but this doesn’t make them impervious to the forces of evil. NT Wright says, “It appears that the ‘two witnesses’ of verses 3–13 are a symbol for the whole church in its prophetic witness, its faithful death, and its vindication by God.”

While it looks like the beast has won and the bodies of the witnesses lay in the streets for a time, the ultimate victory belongs to God. “After the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them.”

This calls to mind another famous OT passage from Ezekiel, one where God shows the prophet a valley of dry bones, where God breathes new life into what looks dead and causes them to live once more. Where there shouldn’t be life, there is now through the power of the Spirit.

Logic would suggest the death of the witnesses would spell the end of the Christian movement. But God has a habit of breathing new life into things that appear dead. Through the Spirit, the witnesses follow in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The death and rebirth of these faithful witnesses is precisely how the world will come to know who God really is. Historically, this has been proven true.

NT Wright argues, “The time of the church’s greatest expansion was the first three centuries, during which the Roman empire was doing its best, through torture and death, to stamp the movement out. ‘The blood of the martyrs’, said one of the great early teachers, ‘is the seed of the church.’ So it has proved again and again.”

Last week we were left with the question, what will cause the people to truly repent? If God’s judgments alone are not enough to wake people up, to make them give up their idols and stop worshipping the works of their hands, then what will?

It is our faithful witness, even unto death. Just as Jesus’ sacrificial death is what made him worthy to open the scroll, it is the sacrificial love and witness of the church that reveals God to the world.

“Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and **the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.**”

The seven thousand is a callback to the Elijah story. In [1 Kings 19](#), we learned there were only

seven thousand in Israel who had not worshipped Baal. The majority of Israel had turned away from God. Now, however, only seven thousand are killed in the earthquake, and the vast majority of humanity comes to fear God and glorify Him. This is meant to be symbolic and hyperbolic language, signifying a great victory for God as more people turn from idolatry, from death to life.

This chapter represents the heart of Revelation's message. If you're a Christian living in Rome during a time of great persecution, it is not an easy message to hear, but it is also hopeful. Don't be afraid to lay down your life. Don't be afraid of Rome, God is with you. Don't give in. Stay faithful, no matter what it costs.

What will conquer the seemingly all-powerful beast? It is not violence, not the roaring lion, but the bloody lamb. How are we called to fight our battles? Not through military might, not through domination, but through laying down our lives in faithful witness to Jesus.

Richard Bauckham says it this way, "To be faithful in witness to the true God even to the point of death is not to become a victim of the beast, but to take the field against him and win."

Sacrificial love and mercy are what wins the day. This is no less a counter-cultural message for us today than it was thousands of years ago. Our inclination is to fight fire with fire, to rise to the level of anger of our enemies or those who wish us ill. To try and control anything that threatens us. Others may be tempted to blend into culture, to adapt to keep the peace, avoid trouble, or reap the benefits of empire.

But Revelation calls us to be faithful. To be steadfast, even in difficult times. Don't give in. Remember, **it is our love, our mercy, our willingness to will the good of the other, and our faithfulness even to the point of death that reveals God to the world.**

– AJ

Wednesday | Revelation 11:15-19

We have finally come to the end of our second cycle of seven. The seventh trumpet is blown, and unlike the seventh seal, which was met with silence, the seventh trumpet ushers in great celebration!

We are taken back up to heaven where they declare, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever." They shout about the turning point that the entire story of Scripture has been awaiting. This is the arrival of God's eternal kingdom!

And do you notice that they are celebrating that God's kingdom is *on earth*? The heavenly choir instead celebrates because all of the former kingdoms of the earth have been overthrown, and now the whole world is the kingdom of God. The arc of Revelation thus far has been building to this point, and instead of God rescuing us from Earth to take us to heaven, the climax is about the transformation that happens here on Earth.

If I'm honest, I didn't always understand that [God intends to make his eternal kingdom here on Earth](#), so if that is you, please know you aren't alone. There is a common misunderstanding in the modern church of what the Gospels say about the kingdom of God, and N.T. Wright explains it far better than I could:

“Christians have understood ‘the kingdom’ simply in terms of ‘God’s kingdom in heaven’, meaning by that that God is in charge in a place called ‘heaven’ (as opposed to this messy place called ‘earth’, from which God wants to rescue us), and that the main aim of life is to ‘enter the kingdom of heaven’ in the sense of ‘going to heaven when you die’. Perhaps one of the many reasons why Revelation has been literally a closed book for so many, and for so much of the church, is that it powerfully and dramatically contradicts this popular view. **God’s kingdom is not simply designed for ‘heaven’, because God is the creator of the whole world, and his entire purpose is to reclaim that whole world as his own and to set it on the way to become the place he always intended it to be, before human rebellion pulled it so disastrously off track.”**

This is fleshed out more fully in the next few verses when the twenty-four elders give God praise, calling him “Lord God Almighty, who *is* and who *was*.” Does this title ring any bells? We have seen ones like it several times in the book so far! But there is a twist happening. Think back to Revelation 1:4 where we read, “Grace to you and peace from him who *is* and who *was* and who *is to come*...” Do you notice the difference?

John omits the phrase “who is to come” in chapter 11 because, **in this vision, there is nothing yet to come.** God has arrived and, as the elders say, “taken [his] great power and begun to reign” (v. 17).

Their words are also filled with hyperlinks to [Psalm 2](#), which is famously recognized as a Messianic Psalm pointing to Jesus. It speaks of the nations raging against God and points to a day in the future when God will establish his son as the king, and he will give him the nations of the world as his inheritance. In John’s vision, the events of Psalm 2 have already happened. Remember, he is “the one who was and is” because the future has now arrived in the present. **In Revelation 11, the “is to come” has become a reality.**

After their song of praise, John says, “God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.” If you remember from yesterday, we began this chapter with temple imagery, and now it is with temple imagery that we end. At the beginning the temple was being measured, pointing to God’s protection of his people. Now, it is being opened, meaning that the dwelling of God is with his people.

This is astounding when you think about the Old Testament context. The ark of the covenant (which, by the way, had been physically missing on the earth for centuries by the time of the first century) was at the heart of the Israelite religion and contained symbols of God’s merciful covenant with them—including the tablets of the Ten Commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s staff. It symbolized God’s presence, but it was so sacred that it was almost always hidden away behind a veil in the Holy of Holies, where no one could enter except the High Priest of Israel.

Yet, now in Revelation, John is telling us that the Holy of Holies has been thrown wide open and any among Jesus’ priesthood of believers (that’s you and me!) can step into his presence. It is as if John is saying to us, “We are going to live in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred space of proximity to the presence of God, forever and ever.”

History ends and eternity begins.

But wait! you say. *You keep talking about how the ‘is to come’ has become the reality, but the*

book isn't over!

And you are right. We still have chapters 12-22 left. Thus, **this chapter becomes a very important reminder to us that what we read in these three cycles of seven seals, trumpets, and bowls isn't a chronological sequence of events.** N.T. Wright explains it well: "What we are dealing with is **several different angles of vision on the one single great reality**: that through the awful turmoil and trouble of the world, God is establishing through Jesus a people who, following the lamb, are to bear witness to God's kingdom through their own suffering, through which the world will be brought to repentance and faith, so that ultimately God will be king over all."

This is the halfway point of the book (congratulations, friends!), and in many ways, this chapter brings us to the climax of part 1 and ushers us into part 2. Part 1 was all about God's control over the created world, and part 2 will be all about the battle between good and evil in heaven and on earth. It will contrast the throne of God with the throne of the dragon, and the imagery will be just as intense as it sounds. But don't be scared! **John has already given away the ending right here in chapter 11: God wins.** The kingdom of this world will become the kingdom of our God, and we will live in his presence for eternity.

The elders tell us that, one day, God will "destroy the destroyers of the earth" (v. 18), and that's what the next section is all about.

– EH

Thursday | Revelation 12:1-17

In Ephesians 6, Paul writes, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." It seems to me chapter 12 is an image of this very conflict.

We begin with three characters: a woman, her child, and a "great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns." Out of these three characters, I can only tell you *conclusively* that the baby represents Jesus. The dragon generates a bit more controversy because some scholars suggest that it symbolizes Rome, but Alex and I are pretty convinced that this is Satan (I'll talk more about this in a minute).

The woman, however, is a bit more complicated.

Take a moment to read through verses 1-6 and 13-14, paying special attention to any references that might connect you back to the Old Testament. Do you have any theories about who she is?

There are four solid theories about who this woman is, but only three of them really make sense to me.

The first is that this is Mary, the mother of Jesus. This would make sense because the woman gives birth to Jesus, but this theory breaks down when we consider the imagery of her crown of twelve stars and her flight to the wilderness. I'm personally unconvinced by this view, especially since this woman is a symbol and not a literal mother.

Next, it could be Eve. This makes a lot of sense when we consider that one of the other characters we are dealing with in this chapter is the serpent/dragon, and when we hear about a serpent and a woman, that should remind us of the Garden of Eden! It is Eve, after all, who is told that her 'seed' will crush the serpent's head in [Genesis 3](#).

Another theory is that this woman is Israel. I think this is an excellent theory, especially because of this crown of 12 stars. What does the number 12 immediately hyperlink us to? The twelve tribes of Israel. Furthermore, we read that she is given "two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness" (v. 14). This is a clear reference back to [Exodus 19](#) when God says, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how **I carried you on eagles' wings** and brought you to myself." And when God carries them on eagles' wings, he brings them into the wilderness.

The last theory is that the woman represents the Church. The imagery of the twelve-starred crown also fits here (not only because of the Church's connection to the twelve tribes but also the twelve disciples), and so does the flight to the wilderness because a large portion of the church did flee to Cappadocia to escape persecution from Rome.

Don't feel unsettled if you can't decide which theory is correct because it is more likely that these are *all layered together* in the image of the woman. Think of a diamond with many facets: depending on which way you turn the image of the woman, you see how she represents Eve, Israel, and the Church—all in one!

Now for the identity of the dragon. When John describes the dragon he calls him *the ancient serpent* and the one "who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world."

As I mentioned earlier, scholars debate whether this dragon is referring to Satan or to Rome, but if I had to give you my best guess, I think this is Satan—the enemy we meet as a slithering snake in the Garden of Eden. When I think about the way that John talks about Rome earlier in the letter—namely in Pergamum, which he calls the "seat of Satan"—it seems to me that John sees the dragon working *through* empires like Rome to oppress God's people. Remember this quote from N.T. Wright that we read in week one: "**John does not identify Rome with the devil. But, as we shall see, he believes that the devil has been using Rome for his own ends, not least to attack the church.**"

This will line up well with the next chapter. We are about to meet two beasts who will represent Rome, and they are like the Dragon's henchman, persecuting God's people at his behest.

Turning back to the plotline, we see that the woman gives birth to her son, and though the dragon wants to devour him, he is caught up to God. Then, war breaks out between the angels and the dragon, and he is thrown down to the earth in defeat.

But wait! In the victory song that rings out in the climax of the vision, the credit for the victory goes not to Michael and his angels but to *the people of God on earth!*

"Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. **And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.**"

The blood of the lamb and their testimony about him are what win the battle with the dragon!

N.T. Wright says “The heavenly reality of the victorious battle is umbilically joined to the earthly reality of the martyrs’ deaths. As followers of the lamb, they believe that they have already been saved by his blood, and that his self-giving to death is the pattern which they must now follow.”

Think back to the multitude in white robes holding palm branches that we saw last week in Revelation 7. This multitude that follows the Lamb fights back against evil the same way he did— through self-giving love.

John says that “they did not love their lives even unto death.” Just like Jesus, they give up their lives. Again we see that victory does not come through causing bloodshed but by the shed blood of the Lamb and his followers, who let themselves be killed as they proclaim that Jesus is the king of the world.

I am in awe of this theme of victory in Revelation. When John calls the seven churches to conquer, THIS is what he means! *This* is how we conquer the world. Our job is to imitate Jesus’ self-sacrificial love for everyone (including our enemies) and remind people that Jesus is the one true king. This is our job—no matter if people make fun of us, misunderstand us, persecute us, or even kill us. We imitate the Lamb and proclaim the Gospel, even unto death.

The story doesn’t end there. The dragon is left stalking around the earth, making war on the rest of the woman’s offspring (that’s you and me), and one way that he is going to do that is through empires like Rome.

The dragon is still looking for more of us to oppress, but we will continue to conquer by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony.

– EH

Friday

Yesterday we were introduced to the great enemy of God’s people, the dragon. Today we meet two more enemies, part of what Michael Gorman calls the “Unholy Trinity.” We will be introduced to two different beasts, however, Revelation will seemingly combine these two beasts into one moving forward, so we’ll end up with the Dragon, The Beast, and the Harlot (ch. 17).

It should go without saying at this point we’re not talking about actual monsters, but symbolic figures that speak to a reality of what God’s people are facing. First comes the beast of the sea.

The First Beast

By now you remember that the sea was the place where monsters dwell in Jewish ideology. The sea is the place of decreation and chaos, representing all things evil. The first beast is said to rise up from the sea. Marty has a great historical and archeological approach to this beast as it relates to Domitian and the physical construction of a Gymnasium in Ephesus, [go listen to the podcast](#) for more on that.

The beast has ten horns, ten diadems, and seven heads. Domitian was the tenth Roman Emperor, and Rome was said to be “The City of Seven Hills.” See the hills depicted alongside the goddess Roma on the coin below.



Revelation then gives us a few key details about this beast, it's like a leopard, a bear, a lion, and something else. Its authority comes from none other than the Dragon himself. For ancient readers, this would've linked back to the vision in [Daniel 7](#).

In his apocalyptic vision, Daniel sees four beasts rising up out of the sea. One is like a lion, another like a bear, a third like a leopard, and a fourth beast, the worst of all, remains unnamed.

“After this I saw in the night visions, and behold, a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces and stamped what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that were before it, and it had ten horns” (Daniel 7:7).

These represented four empires in Daniel's day: Babylon, Media, Persia, and Greece. But in Revelation, there is only one beast, one Empire in question, and that's obviously Rome. Rome is the empire that came back from a mortal wound. This is likely a nod to superstitions surrounding [Emperor Nero coming back to life](#).

Wright summarizes the idea, saying, “Rumours went around that Nero hadn't died after all—or that he had indeed died, but had then come back to life. Several would-be ‘Nero-alive-again’ leaders emerged, and, though none lasted long, the rumour persisted. He was, is not, but is to come, they said (17:8).”

For a time, it would appear that the Roman Empire—blasphemous as it was for declaring its rulers god and forcing people to worship *Roma* and the Imperial Cult—was invincible. Who could withstand persecution from an empire that powerful, an empire the whole known world bows down to? But the faithful once again are called to endure, to stand strong.

The Second Beast

The second beast goes along with the first but is even more dangerous. It comes from the earth; if the sea is the realm of danger and decreation, then the earth could be seen as the place of

shalom and peace. This beast looks like a lamb, it wears the clothes of God's people, but it *speaks like a dragon*. This is the false prophet.

This beast calls to mind people like the Nicolaitans, the ones who believe you can have one foot in God's Kingdom and the other in Rome. You can worship God and beast at the same time. You can be Christian, and reap the benefits of participating in the Roman economic or social systems. This beast promises peace, but it comes from the Dragon and is just as deadly as its master. This beast leads God's people astray with false promises.

"Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or 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."

Far from being about microchips implanted in our wrists or foreheads, this idea in v. 16 and 17 is symbolic in nature. After Domitian, Rome formalized the practice of worshiping the Empire for all its citizens through an edict called the [Libellus](#). This required citizens to show a certificate of worship (proof they'd offered incense to the gods and emperor) in order to buy and sell. It's possible the foundation of this process was laid earlier by other Roman emperors. We know Christians at the time Revelation was written faced pressure to worship Rome and the Greco-Roman gods in order to participate in everyday life.

NT Wright says, "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."

More than anything, the key to this passage is found in the Old Testament. In [Deut. 6](#), which contains the famous Shema Prayer, God tells Israel to bind His commandments on their hands and foreheads. We talked last week about how this was a practice for the High Priest ([Exodus 28](#)), which represented a symbolic reality for the whole nation. Binding something on your hand or forehead was a sign of authority and allegiance. It was a way of saying you belonged to God.

So, Revelation gives us a sick parody of that account. Now we see those who belong to the beast are also marked on the hand or forehead. In other words, their allegiance belongs to the Beast, and ultimately to the dragon.

Next, we get one of the most famous passages in Revelation, "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."

There is an ancient practice in Judaism called [Gematria](#). Hebrew doesn't have separate symbols for numbers. Instead, each letter represents a number. Therefore, every name has a corresponding number. Much ink has been dedicated to mathematically calculating who 666 represents. And there's probably a layer of truth to this in Revelation. The number famously adds up to Nero. Some argue it also adds up to Domitian. Some find modern-day leaders in the number. Others point to the fruitlessness of this practice altogether, making the point that 666 could also add up to Santa Claus!

Here's what we do know. If 7 is the number of perfection or completion, then 6 is the number of incompleteness or imperfection. And in Hebrew poetry, since there is no word for more, repetition

becomes a way of designating importance. Repeating something three times is a way of saying it is of the *utmost importance*. Hence the common refrain in heaven, *Holy, Holy, Holy*. So 666 represents the *utmost* imperfection, the antichrist.

666 is less likely about one person, and more likely pointing to a theological idea. Anyone can dawn the mark of the beast, anyone whose allegiance is against the Creator God.

This has been one of the most challenging passages for me in Revelation up to this point, and it's a message we must wrestle with as individuals and as a church. **Whose mark do you bear? Where do you place your allegiance? And does the way you live bear that out?** When you look at your patterns of buying and selling, what do you notice?

Michael Gorman asks, "Do our ways of spending benefit the least, the last, and the lost? Do they promote justice and the healing of the nations? Do they reflect our convictions about the reign of God and the Lamb? Or do they reflect the values and practices of Babylon, of those who do not know God?"

We don't like dualism, black and white thinking, but it seems to me that Revelation suggests we either bear the mark of God, or we bear the mark of the beast. And this is a really important question. Because even if we think we're just worshiping the beast (empire), that it's okay to have one foot in the church and one foot in the empire, what that means is that ultimately, we're worshiping the *Dragon*, through our dual allegiance, we actually belong to him.

NT Wright says, "Only when we remember the dragon and the monster do we realize what a deadly serious thing Christian faith, patience and holiness really is."

Who are you trusting to save you? Who are you counting on to bring you security, to provide for you? You can't have it both ways. We can't be like the false prophet, worshiping God while whispering the words of the dragon. We can't claim to be of the lamb while perpetrating violence and worshiping idols.

So again, we must ask ourselves, **whose mark do we bear?**

– AJ

Weekly Practice

God tells John to "eat the scroll" (Rev. 10:9), a way of saying to internalize its message. God warns that while it will taste sweet, the message is also hard to stomach at times. For thousands of years, Christians have internalized the message of Scripture as a way of getting God's truths deep into their hearts and consciousness. This week, let's join them in that practice by memorizing a few verses of God's Word. The themes of [Psalm 23](#) pair well with this section of Revelation but feel free to pick any passage you're drawn to. If you're new to Scripture memorization, here are a few tips:

- Index Card: Write the verse(s) on an index card, and carry the card around with you so you can work on memorizing it in your free time.

- Record Yourself: Try recording yourself on your phone reading the verse(s). Listen back to the recording while you're driving, working out, cleaning your house, grocery shopping, etc.
- Make It Visible: Tape the verse(s) to the bathroom mirror or to your car dashboard, and work on memorizing it as you go about your day. You can also put it as your desktop or phone background. You'll honestly be surprised by how much that helps.
- Repetitive Writing: Transcribe the verse(s) by hand. Rewrite the verse(s) over and over, or use hand-lettering or other creative illustrations or pictures as a way of putting it in your mind.
- Repetitive Recitation: Read the verse(s) out loud in two-minute increments and repeat (while allowing some time for your mind to rest).

Reflection Questions

- What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
- The message John hears is both sweet and bitter. Can you think of a time you've had a similar experience with God's word?
- How do you think God might be calling you to be a faithful witness today? What do you find challenging about that calling?
- How does your perspective change when you recognize that one day *this world* will become the kingdom of our God? Does this challenge any assumptions you have or perhaps grew up with about where we are going to spend eternity?
- Most of us will not find ourselves in a situation where we're literally laying down our lives because of our faith in Jesus, but that doesn't mean Revelation's message means any less for us. How are we called to model Jesus' example of sacrificial love and mercy today?
- Think super practically. What is one way that you could show someone the sacrificial love of Jesus this week? This could be a family member, friend, coworker, etc. (Bonus points if it is someone that you have had conflict with before or who is very different from you!)
- Are there places where you're tempted to believe you can have it both ways— worshipping God while also worshipping things like consumerism, materialism, success, power, pleasure, etc.?
- What do your financial habits say about where you place your ultimate allegiance? Do they reflect the lamb's convictions or those of Babylon?

Resources

- [Spiritual Beings Series: The Satan and Demons](#) | Bible Project | Video
- [Chaos Dragon](#) | Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation – Bittersweet Prophecy](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation – Mother and Dragons](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation – The Blessed and the Faithful Fallen](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [The Day of the Lord Theme Video](#) | Bible Project | Video
- [Visual Guide to Plagues of Exodus](#) | Alex Johnston | PDF

- [Guide to Revelation](#) | The Bible Project | Webpage
- [Revelation Overview \(Ch. 1-11\)](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation Class](#) | Teaching Series with Rev. Walt Marcum
- [Reading Revelation Responsibly](#) | Michael J. Gorman | Commentary
- [Revelation for Everyone](#) | N.T. Wright | Commentary
- [Bearing God's Name](#) | Carmen Imes | Book