



The Victory of the Lamb

4. Seven Signs & Seven Plagues

- What do we see as the evidence of “the mark of the beast” in the mind-set and deeds which are approved in our age?
- What is the evidence of “the mark of the beast” in the thinking of the Church?
- How can we avoid “the mark of the beast”?

The sixth and seventh signs – the Lamb with his people on Mount Zion (14.1-5) and the harvest of the earth (14.6-20) – point to the Lamb’s triumph and to the coming judgment of God.

Seven Plagues

Read: Revelation 16.12-16

Michael J. Wilcock summarises the bowls of wrath, “Another procession of angels now comes on the scene, emerging from the ‘temple’, that is, from the place where mankind is confronted by God. John sees not only God’s glory and power, but also his anger and his indestructible life (15.7-8). He will outface and outlast all who oppose him. The trumpets warned his enemies, but the time for warning and repentance is now past, and from the angels’ bowls punishment is poured out. If you compare this section with the trumpet warnings you will see that they run parallel. But the first destruction was partial; this one is total.

“So here is yet another picture of what is happening in history, this time from the point of view of how God finally deals with unrepentant wickedness. Bowl 6 brings the world to an end, with the last battle and the coming of Christ (16.15-16). With bowl 7, the divine punishment ‘is done’, and all is over.”

The book does not follow a usual chronological sequence. The seventh bowl has brought us to the end of the divine punishment, yet the final conflicts and the defeat of Satan are yet to be described.

- Reflect on Rom.1.16-18. Paul writes of the reality of God’s righteous anger. The time will come when repentance and grace are no longer offered as options. What then is our responsibility in this present era?

Sometimes politicians make one-line statements that stick in the memory and – for better or worse – are remembered by the electorate.

It was Malcolm Fraser, as Prime Minister, who said, “Life wasn’t meant to be easy.” We may not recall the context that called forth that comment, yet we remember it. Undoubtedly, some saw it as an easy escape-hatch for justifying tough or unpopular policies. Others thought he was a well-to-do farmer born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

He was right, of course! And the farmers I know wouldn’t continue farming if they objected to hard work, uncertainty, disappointment...

And did Jesus promise us that the Christian life would be easy? No, he didn’t! Not only do his statements about the secrets of human happiness (Mt. 5.3ff) stand in contrast to popular wisdom then and now, but they end with the statement, “Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven. This is how the prophets who lived before you were persecuted” (vv. 11-22).

Seven Signs

Leon Morris writes, “This group of visions is connected with the troubles of the church. It is, of course, true that the whole of Revelation is written to a church which faced persecution, and that whatever else it may be meant to do, every section of the book is designed to help harassed believers. But especially is this so with the section to which we now come. It stresses the important truth that God has decisively defeated the devil. Satan opposed Christ from the beginning and tried to destroy Him, but without avail. The evil one has been cast out of heaven. His power on earth is, to be sure, terrifyingly real to believers. But this is not because he is triumphant. It is because he knows that he is beaten and has but a short time. Let the church then take heart. She will have her martyrs, but ultimate triumph is sure.”

Read: Revelation 12.1-6

Study 5: The Lamb’s Triumph – Revelation 17-20

The first sign is “the woman whose dress was the sun”. We recognise her as Israel, the chosen people of God – the twelve stars being the twelve patriarchs or the tribes descended from them. “She comes standing upon the Old Testament revelation of reflected light and clothed with the New Testament revelation which is as the sun shining in his strength” (Torrance).

Leon Morris comments, “For the early Christians there was an important continuity between the old Israel and the church, the true Israel. Here the woman is undoubtedly Israel who gives birth to the Messiah. But in the latter part of the chapter she is the church who is persecuted for her faith.”

The “huge red dragon” is Satan, constantly in opposition to the purposes of God and the people of God. He has his own host of demonic followers.

The second sign – Satan is cast out of heaven (vv. 7-12). Paul wrote that “we are not fighting against human beings, but against the wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities, and cosmic powers of this dark age” (Eph. 6.12). John’s vision goes further than this. It emphasises that we are part of a larger battle between good and evil in which angelic forces are also involved.

This defeat of Satan is not yet his final destruction. God’s power and authority are celebrated, but Satan meantime is angry and will wreak havoc on earth “because he knows he has only a little time left.”

The third sign is war between Satan and the woman (vv. 13-17). Because Satan is unsuccessful in destroying the Son (we may reflect on the temptations of Jesus in Mt. 4.1-11, and presume his glee at a successful crucifixion plot and his anger at the resurrection), he turns his vengeance towards the woman and her other children.

- Reflect on the words of Jesus in Jn 16.33 – “The world will make you suffer. But be brave! I have defeated the world!”
- In what areas are we as Christians most prone to temptation?
- The church in Australia has lived in relative peace. From what quarters is persecution possible or likely?

The fourth and fifth signs are about two related beasts – one from the sea (13.1-10), the other from the earth (vv.11-18).

In a number of places the New Testament refers to a special outbreak of evil in the last days. Sometimes it refers to an individual called “Antichrist” (1 Jn 1.8 – “the Enemy of Christ”, G.N.B.) or “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2.3 – “the Wicked One”, G.N.B.). In this passage it seems almost like an incarnation of the evil one within human life and society.

Read: Revelation 13.11-18

Who is this beast and what is the “mark of the beast”? The only clues to his identity are that it seems to refer to a particular person and that his name is represented by the number 666. In Greek the letters of the alphabet were used for numerals. Those studying the mystery have tried adding the letters of many names and have come up with a number of possible solutions. Leon Morris inclines to the view that 666 represents a continual falling short of 777, that it is “the number of man” rather than a reference to a particular man and that John is saying “that unregenerate man is persistently evil.” This is certainly our reference for now, though in the future the “beast” may come to have a more specific reference.

Then what of this mark “on their right hands and on their foreheads”? Again there has been much speculation with some people being vigilant lest they be trapped into receiving “the mark”.

It makes most sense to me to refer back to Deut. 6.4-9 (called by the Jews the *Shema* and recited every day). In this passage they are told, “...Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. Teach them to your children. Repeat them when you are at home and when you are away, when you are resting and when you are working. Tie them on your arms and wear them on your foreheads as a reminder. Write them on the door-posts of your houses and on your gates.”

Did the Lord really mean them to wear phylacteries, those little leather boxes containing minute transcriptions of the Law, worn on their foreheads and tied to their wrists? The essence of the command was that the Law of the Lord was to control their thinking (foreheads) and their actions (wrists), and as well the life of their home (door-posts) and all their comings and goings (gates).

There may come to be a physical “mark of the beast”, but in the meantime we note the work of evil in how people think and in how they act. It is possible to be looking for “666” and to fail to see the extent to which we ourselves are drawn to the false values and actions of our age.