

Revelation 13:15–18

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed. And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: and that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.

The Mark — Universal and Coercive

The mark of the beast is applied universally — small and great, rich and poor, free and bond. No class of person is exempt. It is egalitarian in a terrible way, a dark parody of the gospel that goes out to all without distinction: *there is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and the same Lord is rich unto all that call upon him*. The gospel reaches all with good news. The mark reaches all with coercion.

The mark is on the right hand or the forehead. The hand speaks of service — what one does, what one accomplishes. The forehead speaks of identification and ownership — whose one is, what one confesses. Later in the book of Revelation, *His name shall be in their foreheads* — the saints are marked as belonging to the Lord. Here the mark of the beast in the forehead declares the same thing in the opposite direction: these are avowedly the beast's. The right hand is what is

ordinarily associated with active power and with doing good — and here it is given over to identification with the beast.

The consecration of the priests in Israel involved blood on the tip of the right ear, the thumb of the right hand, and the great toe of the right foot — for hearing, for service, and for the walk. This mark is on the hand and the forehead. There is no mark on the ear — no hearing — and no mark on the foot — no walk. The mark of the beast is concerned entirely with service to the beast and identification with him. Nothing to do with hearing God's word or walking in God's ways.

No Buying or Selling without the Mark — Commerce as the Lure

The practical enforcement is economic: no one can buy or sell without the mark, the name of the beast, or the number of his name. The beast uses the most important thing in ordinary human life — commerce, the meeting of daily needs — as the lever for universal compliance. It is not a painful thing that is set before people as the inducement. It is the most apparently desirable thing: the ability to live, to feed one's family, to function in society.

This is the great contrast with the marks of the Lord Jesus. The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 6:17: *I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus* — Darby renders it the brands. The brands of a slave — one who belongs entirely to the master who died for him. Not a relationship of law-keeper to law-giver but of a slave who owes everything to his Lord. The mark of the beast is the devil's version of that — the brand of ownership stamped on those who belong to him, purchased not by precious blood but by the ability to buy bread.

The Number of a Man — Six Hundred and Sixty-Six

Verse 18 says: here is wisdom — and then calls for understanding to count the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. Those in that day who are

given God's understanding will have light to see clearly that this supposed invincible power, with all its lying wonders and satanic energising, is after all only the number of a man. It falls short of seven, the number of completeness. It falls short of the glory of God — as all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. The beast is the pinnacle of what Satan can produce in a man, and it is still only six. Still only a man. He will perish as men perish — and indeed, as no man has ever perished before, being cast alive into the lake of fire, where he and the false prophet are still found a thousand years later.

The verse has attracted an enormous amount of speculation about the identity of the beast, stretching back to the earliest centuries. It also generated the practice of gematria — looking for hidden knowledge by converting names into numbers. But the text itself does not authorise that use. It says the number is the number of a man. The mark is one thing, the number of his name is another, and verse 17 presents them as alternatives — the mark need not be the number. The wisdom that verse 18 calls for is not the ability to decode hidden information, but the fear of the Lord which recognises that all of this power, for all its display, is still only a man. That is what those who fear God in that day will know — and that knowledge will preserve them.

When God speaks, He speaks plainly. When He does not wish to be entirely plain, He speaks in parables — not in hidden numerical codes. The truth of Scripture is in the words that are written, not in patterns to be extracted by computer from the arrangement of letters. What is given here for wisdom and understanding is the recognition that the man behind the number is only a man, and that all his power is a borrowed and delegated thing — given to him, not his own. The Lord Jesus, by contrast, received all things from the Father's hand, at the Father's time, as man — not from the enemy. And every title and honour belongs to Him by right.

— *Study ends* —