

# Lesson 32

Last week we looked at the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth in Chapter 13. We saw that each beast represents Rome, but from different perspectives. The beast from the sea shows Rome from the perspective of the evil Roman emperors. The beast from the earth shows Rome from the perspective of its false religion — Caesar worship. Combining those two views of Rome, we see that Rome is being shown to us as a royal priesthood, just as the church was earlier shown to us. Which royal priesthood will prevail? The royal priesthood of God? Or the royal priesthood of man?

Verses 16-18 tell us more about the beast from the sea, including a description in verse 18 that is one of the most well-known descriptions in the entire book of Revelation.

One of the things we saw last week is that this second beast representing Caesar worship arose from the earth. As we discussed, that this beast comes from the earth shows us that it is a man-made religion. And no man-made religion could possibly be the eternal kingdom made without hands. That was true then, and that is still true today.

There is also a historical reason why this second beast is shown as arising from the earth. Caesar worship did not arise from Caesar; Caesar worship arose from the Roman people.

It is wrong to think that the various peoples conquered by Rome all resented that new Roman government. Instead, for the most part, they were grateful for it. Rome had brought justice, and law, and peace, and prosperity. The *pax Romana*, the Roman peace, stretched over all the known world.

That is why the Roman people, and especially the people who lived in the Roman provinces, were grateful to Rome, and it is easy to see how that gratitude began to be focused on the emperor, who stood for Rome and embodied Rome. It was in Asia Minor (to which the letters in Chapters 2-3 are addressed) that people first began to think of Caesar as a god.

At first the emperors discouraged this worship. Then they tried to confine it to the provinces, but soon it spread everywhere. And then the Roman government saw that they could use that Caesar worship as a unifying force to bring together all of the various peoples and cultures that they had conquered. And

eventually the emperors began to believe their own press clippings — they began to believe that they were in fact gods. That was certainly true of Domitian, as Paul tells us in 2 Thessalonians 2:4.

One other thing that we should understand about Rome is that Rome was the essence of toleration. After someone had burned his pinch of incense to Caesar and confessed that “Caesar is Lord,” that person could then go away and worship any god he liked, so long as that worship did not affect public decency and public order.

But, of course, no Christian could ever make such a confession. Christians refused to conform, and so the Roman government regarded them as dangerous and disloyal. The Roman government persecuted the church because they insisted that they had no king but Christ. Persecution came to the Christians because they put Christ first. And doesn't persecution always come to people who do that?

Today we also live in a nation that is the essence of toleration — but doesn't our nation also have its pinches of incense? Doesn't our own nation have its own required confessions?

Aren't we daily called upon to confess that homosexuality is natural and approved by God? Aren't we daily called upon to confess that evolution is a fact? Aren't we daily called upon to confess that all religions are equal? And we could go on and on because the list of required confessions gets longer and longer every year.

No Christian can make those confessions, and so we face persecution. Not much has changed, although thankfully we are not facing the type of persecution they faced, at least not yet. In Rome, the persecution began as economic persecution — the Christians would lose their livelihood when they failed to make the proper confession. We have already reached that point in this country. What is next?

Whatever comes next, we know what we must do. We must remain faithful to Christ. Yes, the world will hate us — but isn't that what Jesus told us to expect?

***Luke 6:22-23** — Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in*

*heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets.*

Is the book of Revelation relevant for us today? Let me ask that question a different way — is a book that shows how a Christian must live in the face of government persecution relevant today? Yes, and it is increasingly relevant. We also need the message of comfort and victory in this final book of the Bible. Yes, that message was originally for those suffering under the hand of Rome. But it is also a message for the church in any age.

### **Revelation 13:16-18**

**16 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: 17 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. 18 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.**

Verse 16 tells us that the beast marked his own people. Just as God marked his people in Chapter 7 to show that they are his, the beast marks his people here in Chapter 13 for the same reason — to show that they belong to the beast.

God knows his people. Satan also knows his people. Everyone on earth then and everyone on earth today is wearing someone's mark. Each of us either belongs to God or to Satan. Each of us is either in the power of darkness or in the kingdom of God's dear son (Colossians 1:13).

But surely all of the famous people are okay with God, right? And the rich people don't have any reason to worry, right? Wrong. God and Satan have one thing in common — neither is a respecter of persons! Verse 16 tells us that Satan marks "both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond." Men create all sorts of distinctions based on race, wealth, politics, and many other categories. But when viewed from eternity only one distinction matters — in

Christ or out of Christ. It is that distinction and no other that determines whose mark you are wearing. It is that distinction and no other that determines where you will spend eternity.

Verse 17 tells us that no one could buy or sell without the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. What does that mean?

When we discussed the letters to the seven churches in Chapters 2-3, we discussed the economic persecution that Christians suffered at the hands of the Roman trade guilds. A confession that Caesar is Lord was usually required before one was allowed to buy or sell. Those who refused to make that confession were seen as unpatriotic, and they suffered severe economic hardships. Remember what Jesus said to some of them in Revelation 2:9 — “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich).” They had physical poverty and spiritual riches.

Christians in the first century were faced with a daily choice — Caesar or Christ. They could wear the mark of Christ by confessing Christ, or they could wear the mark of the beast by confessing Caesar. The mark of the beast allowed them to practice their trade and make a living. The mark of Christ brought hardship and persecution. That is the daily choice for every Christian in every age: Caesar or Christ.

***Matthew 5:10-12** — Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.*

***Luke 9:23-24** — If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.*

Verses 17-18 tell us four more things about the mark of the beast — it is the name of the beast, it is the number of his name, it is the number of a man, and the number is 666. What does all of that mean?

Revelation 13:18 is one of the most famous verses in the Bible, perhaps ranking right up there with John 3:16. Verse 18 has entered the public consciousness

to a greater degree than any other verse in the book of Revelation. People who can't even name the four gospel writers can tell you something about 666. As one commentator has noted, "no verse in Revelation has received more attention than this one with its cryptic reference to the number of the beast."

Verse 18 begins with a call for wisdom, and yet verse 18 has spawned a great deal of foolishness. Did you know that the barcodes found on every product you buy today are the mark of the beast and a clear indication that we are living in the end times? Some say so. The two bars that denote the number six appear at the beginning, middle, and end of every barcode found on the back cover of most books. Terry Cook in his book *The Mark of the New World Order* writes that "the entire [UPC barcode] system is very deceptively designed around the infamous numerical configuration, Biblically known as 666, the mark of the Antichrist or devil." Mary Stewart Relfe in her book *The New Money System 666* writes that "the Prophet John identified this Cashless System of Commerce 1900 years ago as one in which business would be transacted with a 'Mark' and a Number; the Mark will obviously be a Bar Code; the Number will be '666;' the combination of the two, about which you will read in this book, will be an integral part of the '666 System.'" Ridiculous? Yes, extremely so, but sadly not uncommon at all when it comes to explanations of 666. How anyone can reach those crazy conclusions in a verse that opens with the phrase "here is wisdom" is beyond me!

When I think of the number 666, I think of my sister. That statement likely needs a bit of explanation! Many people today are very superstitious about the number 666. When my sister worked at *Texas Commerce Bank* in the early eighties, she received the following letter (which she gave to me, and which I still have):

To Whom It May Concern, I feel that I must return this credit card to you because of the account number. If you'll notice the last 3 digits are the numbers "666." I am a Christian and these numbers have been talked about in the Bible as a mark of the Antichrist. For this reason I am returning this card to you. If you do not understand what I am talking about I would only encourage you to open your bible and read it to understand.

That's good advice, but when we open our Bibles, we will not find anything in here at all about the mark of the antichrist. In fact, the word "antichrist" appears nowhere in the book of Revelation. And we will not find anything in here about bar codes or credit cards. Instead, what we find is a number that

must be interpreted, as we do all of the symbols in this book, in view of its context and its time frame. And we need to interpret the symbol with wisdom, which means we must apply the wisdom we obtain from the entirety of God's word — not just this one verse.

What does the number 666 depict? Let's ask another question first — what number would we choose to represent **divine perfection**? Well, three is the number for God, and seven is the number for perfection — so wouldn't 777 be a very good choice for a symbol of divine perfection? If we did, then we know that no created being could ever be described as 777. Instead, that symbolic number 777 could be applied only to the Creator, not ever to a mere creature.

With that thought in mind, let's re-ask our earlier question: what does the number 666 depict? Isn't the answer easy now? Doesn't verse 18 itself give us a big clue? It is the number of a man. Is it not the number of the Creator, but it is the number of a man. If 777 denotes divine perfection, then what number would we choose to represent someone who had aspirations of divinity, but who fell hopelessly short of that goal? The number 666. This beast wanted to be a 777, but it was only a 666! It fell short in every respect! The beast thought it was a god, but it was just a man. The beast thought it was 777, but it was only 666.

Does that view of the symbol 666 accurately describe this beast? Yes! No symbol could describe this beast any better! This beast represents the false perverted religious side of Rome. It represents the man-made Roman religion that worshiped the creature (Caesar) rather than the creator (Romans 1:25). **Jesus is 777! Caesar is 666!** It is a beautiful symbol that shows the stark contrast between God and his creation.

**Hailey:** "666 stands for the complete and total failure of all human systems and efforts antagonistic to God and His Christ — all are doomed to ultimate and complete defeat and failure."

But can this really be all there is to 666! Surely it must be something more than that! It was a lot more than that in that movie, *The Omen*! As I recall, Gregory Peck found 666 tattooed on the head of Damien the Antichrist! There are several responses to that objection.

First, for those apart from Christ who are struggling to locate 666, all they need to do is look in a mirror. For anyone outside of Christ, the number 666 is easy to find — they are wearing it! Satan has marked them with it. The only

way to remove that mark is with the blood of Christ through obedience to the gospel.

Second, we need to let the Bible rather than Hollywood explain the symbols in this book, and we need to view this symbol in its proper perspective. The symbol of 666 is just another symbol in a book full of symbols. It may stand apart from the other symbols in our modern consciousness, but it does not stand apart from the other symbols in the text.

Yes, 666 is a wonderfully descriptive symbol, but there are many other wonderfully descriptive symbols in the book of Revelation. We must remember that this book was primarily intended to provide comfort to the first century Christians who were suffering intense persecution by Rome. If our interpretation of the book ignores that fundamental fact, then our interpretation is wrong. The church needed to know that Rome was just a 666!

**Lenski:** In other words, not 777, but competing with 777, seeking to obliterate 777, but doing so abortively, its failure being as complete as was its expansion by puffing itself up from 6 to 666.

Is there a lesson for the church today in the symbol of 666? Yes. The church needs to understand today that there are many 666's in our own world. **We are surrounded by man-made churches, man-made religions, and man-made philosophies — and all of them are just 666.** There are many so-called churches today that should have 666 printed on their signs out front because they are just **a man-made church proclaiming a man-made gospel.** They may have delusions of grandeur, but they are just 666. And on that great last day, the last thing you want to rely on is a 666.

*Acts 4:12 — Neither is there salvation in any other:  
for there is none other name under heaven given  
among men, whereby we must be saved.*

And that name is 777!

Before we leave our discussion of verse 18, we need to consider another possible significance for 666, and it stems from something called **gematria**. Gematria refers to the representation of words by their numerical equivalents so that the number then represents the word. It is not very common today, but that has not always been the case.

We know that gematria was common in the first century. At Pergamum, inscribed stones have been found containing numerical riddles based on gema-

tria. Graffiti found in the ruins of Pompeii reads, “I love her whose number is 545,” and “Amerimnus thought upon his lady Harmonia for good. The number of her honorable name is 45.” One commentator states that “gematria was widely used in apocalyptic [literature] because of its symbolic and enigmatic quality.” I don’t think it is widely used in the Bible, but it may be used here in verse 18.

Here are the questions we need to consider: **First**, is the reference to 666 in verse 18 an example of gematria? **Second**, if so, then to what or to whom does the number refer? **Third**, if so, is that meaning the primary meaning of the symbol or perhaps just a secondary meaning?

Let’s start with the third question first. Earlier we discussed the symbolic meaning of 666 as something that has fallen hopelessly short of the divine 777, and we saw how that symbol perfectly depicted the second beast from the earth. That symbol fits so perfectly and is explained so well in terms of the symbol seven (around which this entire book is constructed), I am convinced that the primary meaning behind the symbol of 666 is something that has fallen hopelessly short of divine perfection. And so, if we determine that gematria is being used in verse 18, I think it must be just a *secondary* meaning of the symbol.

And there is some evidence in the text for that view — verse 18 begins with a call for wisdom, which may be an indication that a dual meaning is involved here. We see something similar in Matthew 24:15 when Jesus refers to Daniel’s prophecy about the abomination of desolation: “whoso readeth, let him understand.” When we studied Daniel we saw that Daniel prophesied about two such abominations, one that occurred under the Greeks and one that occurred later under the Romans. I think Jesus was cautioning his listeners to read those prophecies from Daniel extra carefully to make sure they didn’t confuse those two events. Perhaps the phrase “let him that hath understanding” in verse 18 is here for a similar reason. We have discussed before how difficult it is to determine secondary meanings for prophecies absent being explicitly told by God. There is no such explicit statement in verse 18, but there may be a suggestion in verse 18.

So, that leaves us with two questions — was gematria used here, and, if so, to what or to whom does the number 666 refer?

Before we answer those questions, we should pause to consider an important warning. One has to be very careful when heading off into this direction in the Bible because right near the edge of these questions there is a very steep

slope heading straight down into sheer speculation and utter nonsense. Those going down this road sometimes find themselves trying to read some numerical significance into every word of the Bible. Many books have been published that claim to have discovered a secret code in the Bible that predicts the names, locations, and dates of future events. What those books fail to tell you is that those same methods could be applied to almost any book to obtain similar secret messages. People need to quit looking for secret messages in the Bible and start heeding the messages in the Bible that are clear for all to understand.

We need to be particularly careful with gematria because, as we know, it is possible to prove anything with numbers if one is willing to twist the facts while ignoring the context and all other evidence to the contrary.

But with that said, anyone who studies 666 and the history of its interpretation must be struck by some strange curiosities. For example, we all know the six Roman numbers: I(1), V(5), X(10), L(50), C(100), and D(500). What do you get when you add up the values of the five Roman numbers? 666. Take the first seven primes numbers (2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, and 17) and sum their squares:  $4 + 9 + 25 + 49 + 121 + 169 + 289$ . What do you get? 666. Spooky! (And irrelevant!)

So, going back to the text, is gematria used in verse 18? Possibly. We know that gematria was common at the time, and we know that some of the earliest commentaries on Revelation have turned to gematria to explain this verse.

But then what could 666 denote? There are a number of words and names that could be represented by 666, depending on the language we choose (Hebrew, Greek, or Latin) and how we then associate letters in that language with numbers. Having this many variables makes it very difficult to determine which (if any) was the word or phrase (if any) that God intended for us to associate with 666.

We should probably not expect a perfect fit. Why? Because in my view the primary meaning of 666 does not rely on gematria but rather relies on the symbolic meaning of 666 as falling short of 777. That is, the number 666 was not chosen to represent a name but was chosen for its symbolic significance. It may *also* represent a name, but if it does we should probably not expect the same perfect fit we would have had if the number had been chosen solely on that basis.

There is evidence that some have tried to change the text to make what they consider a better fit. Some of your Bibles may have a footnote that says some

early texts have 616 in verse 18 rather than 666. Lenski describes that textual issue:

This is not a faulty transcription but a deliberate alteration that was made very early and against which the strongest protest was at once raised. The alteration was made so that by gematria the number would fit the emperor [Caligula]. This was the man who made the effort to have his image erected in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Thus, those early texts that show 616 in place of 666 most likely represent someone's attempt to make the number 666 a better fit for someone's name by changing it to 616. The correct value is 666, not 616.

But those early manuscripts with 616 do tell us something important. Those changes from 666 to 616 confirm that from very early in its history commentators have understood verse 18 to include an example of gematria. We should not be too quick to discount viewpoints that are closely located in time to the original readers of this book.

So who could 666 represent? There are numerous candidates, but, not surprisingly, the leading candidate is Nero, whose name could also be said to depict Domitian as *Nero Redivivus*. Various numerical representations will give us 666 from either Nero Caesar or *Neron* (the Latin form of his name that appears, for example, in the subscript in the KJV at the end of 2nd Timothy), but other names can be made to fit as well. In short, no one can be certain that gematria is used, and if it is used, no one can be certain who is represented, but Nero is a likely candidate because of the context of verse 18.

Let's next consider the other side of the argument. A very good case can be made for the proposition that no gematria at all is involved in verse 18. For example, verse 18 omits a definite article before "man," which may indicate that no particular man is in mind. Also, as one commentator notes, "what is not generally stressed is that [the most commonly given] solution [pointing to Nero] asks you to calculate a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of a Latin name, and that with a defective spelling." Lenski gives us other objections as well:

It is surprising to note how many men think that "666" is the product of gematria. ... Yet nowhere is Scripture, nowhere in Revelation do we meet with another case of gematria. ... A number that is produced by gematria would remain an insolu-

ble conundrum; yet the very title of this book is “Revelation.” ... Take some name and set down the value of each of its letters, add these, write the sum. A hundred other names may produce the same sum.

Those are all good objections, and some of them are even compelling. But with those objections stated, I still believe it is possible that 666 has a secondary significance based on gematria, and I would point to verses 17-18 for support as well as the view of ancient commentators on that subject.

Whatever we conclude about gematria, the primary significance of 666 is that it falls hopelessly short of the divine perfection. That idea fits perfectly with the context of this second beast representing the false perverted religion of Rome.

What then is the setting at the end of Chapter 13? A terrible dragon has given his authority to a seven headed beast that has arisen from the sea. The beast is killed but comes back to life. A second beast arises and looks like a lamb but sounds like a dragon. The second beast performs signs and wonders and causes the earth to worship the first beast. The chapter ends with the whole earth in the spell of the dragon and the two beasts.

What does the church need at this point? The church needs comfort and assurance, which is exactly what Chapter 14 provides.

## Chapter 14

### **Revelation 14:1-5**

**1 And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father’s name written in their foreheads. 2 And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of a great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: 3 And**

**they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth. 4 These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb. 5 And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God.**

Look at the incredible contrast between the last verse of Chapter 13 and the first verse of Chapter 14! Chapter 13 ended with the mark of the beast that was written on all those who worshiped the dragon. Chapter 14 begins with those who have the name of the Lamb and the name of the Father on their foreheads.

We have been tracing the number two through this book, and here we see two groups. We see the group that has chosen Caesar in Chapter 13, and we see the group that has chosen Christ in Chapter 14. There is no third group.

There is no doubt to whom these people in Chapter 14 belong! They have the Father's name written on their foreheads! "The Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Timothy 2:19).

There is a lesson here for us today. Is there ever any doubt about to whom we belong? There was no doubt for these Christians in first century Rome. To be a Christian in Rome meant a constant risk to one's life and one's livelihood. There were very few half-hearted lackluster Christians at that time.

But what about today? We need to live our lives in such a way that no one will ever have any doubt that we belong to Christ. Our Christian walk should be so apparent to the world that it is as if we literally had the name of God marked on our foreheads.

Who is the group in verses 1-5? Let's consider the clues:

- We see the 144,000 again in verse 1. We recognize that number as a beautiful symbol for ALL of God's people: twelve times twelve times ten times ten times ten!
- The Father's name is written on their foreheads in verse 1. These people belong to God. He has claimed them as his own.
- In verse 3, there is a new song that only the 144,000 can learn. That tells us that this group has a special relationship with Christ that no one else can share.
- In verse 3, this group is described as those "which were redeemed from the earth."
- In verse 4, this group is described as virgins, which stresses their purity.
- Verse 4 tells us that they "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth."
- Verse 4 tells us that they are "redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb."
- Verse 5 tells us that "in their mouth was found no guile."
- Verse 5 tells us that "they are without fault before the throne of God."

There cannot be any doubt as to the identity of this group — **it is the church!**