

Unshakable

Week 5: The Beast

Revelation 13

I've been a follower of Jesus for about 27 years now and these are the main 3 Bibles that I have used during that time. (Describe them.)

They're filled with notes and highlights and underlines. Some pages are worn and torn from how many times I've gone back to those passages. But, if you took all 3 of them and turned to the book of Revelation, here's what you'd find:

Revelation 1-3 has some notes and underlines and highlights, mostly in Jesus' letters to the churches in chapters 2 and 3. Then there's some more underlines and notes and highlights around the New Heaven and New Earth stuff in chapters 21 and 22. But, between Revelation 4 and Revelation 20, each of these Bible's is like a desert wasteland of annotations!

There's nothing! To be quite honest with you, these are the chapters I've kind of avoided in Scripture. I haven't really studied them. I haven't taught on them, except for Revelation 12 last Christmas Eve. I just haven't spent a lot of time in this neck of the Biblical woods because these are the weird chapters of Revelation. These are the chapters filled with all kinds of images and symbols and numbers. Things I just didn't know what to do with.

I'm still not sure I know what to do with them, but I at least want to talk about them today and share some things with you that I'm learning about the weird stuff in Revelation. When we come to this letter, we all come with our own baggage about its purpose, or reasons why we don't understand it or just avoid it all together.

("The Book of Revelations is meant to _____ you." slide)

All of us would fill in this blank with a different word (**Confuse; Scare; Frustrate**), but that's not why Jesus had John write this letter. The book of Revelation is actually meant to **encourage** you. And as we begin to understand its message in a simple, down to earth way, I believe that's exactly what it does.

Honestly, that's what I've experienced as we've studied and preached through this series. Revelation has moved from a book of the Bible that I just kind of avoided to what I now see is a profound message to followers of Jesus and the Church today. Not because it helps us decode headlines and discover clues about the end times...that's not why this letter was written.

It was written to help us discern the truth about evil and encourage us to remain faithful to Jesus because those of us who are *in Christ* will ultimately overcome. That is what the book of Revelation is meant to do, and all of the images and symbols and numbers in this ooey-

gooey weird part in the middle are meant to reinforce that message. So, buckle up, buttercups, because we're about to dive in! And we're going to start with some numbers.

Revelation is filled with numbers. Lots and lots and lots of numbers. And many of these numbers are set in patterns that repeat. And some of the interpretations that have led to so much confusion about Revelation is because people want to have their calculators sitting next to their Bible as they read this book.

Greg Robbins, who did such a great job kicking off this series and whose book we made available, does a wonderful job addressing this in chapter 11 of Revelation Simplified. In it, he writes, "The numbers in Revelation are not math problems to solve, but symbols to discern."

The book of Revelation uses numbers symbolically. Kind of like the way we use "24/7" to mean "all the time," or "110%" to mean they gave everything they had. They didn't really go 24/7 or give 110%, but we know what they mean. In the same way, Revelation uses numbers to communicate spiritual truths about God's creation, and people, and judgement.

3 – Ultimate expression of something. The #3 symbolizes completeness or fullness. We see it in the way God is worshiped as "Holy, holy, holy." He is the One "who is, who was, and who is to come." We even see it in the three fold expression of evil. The dragon and the two beasts that we'll talk about later.

4 – All encompassing. Revelation describes the people of the earth as being from every tribe, language, people, and nation. It's meant to be an all-encompassing depiction of human life.

7 – Completeness, fullness, sometimes perfection. The number 7 is used over 50 times in Revelation. 7 churches, 7 angels, 7 stars, 7 horns and eyes and heads and crowns. The number 7 is used to describe the fullness of the Church, the perfection of Christ's sacrifice, the complete evil of the dragon, the totality of God's judgement against Satan and evil.

3½ – Incomplete or partial. It represents a limited time of suffering and persecution for believers. It's used to show that, evil has its moment, but it is only temporary and still under God's control.

Multiples of 12 – The people of God.

- 12 typically refers to the 12 tribes of Israel.
- $12 \times 2 = 24$. 24 elders likely represent both the Old and New Covenant people of God. Israel in the Old Covenant, the Church in the New.

- $12 \times 12,000 = 144,000$. This is John using the symbolism of the number 12 and turning it to 11!
 - Jehovah Witnesses unfortunately, and mistakenly, take this to mean a literal 144,00 elite Christians who will survive God's judgement on evil.
 - I think it's best understood as a symbol for the complete people of God who belong to Him.
 - Just like John hears Jesus described as a Lion in chapter 5, but turns to see a Lamb, he hears 144,000 in chapter 7, but turns to see
 - "...a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." -Rev. 7:9

1,000 – A large number of. A large number of people. A large number of years. Time in Revelation is used symbolically. It's not literal. Which is what I wanted to tell my unnamed friend this week who sent me this message...(show Rev. 8:1 screenshot)

That is NOT what this verse means. In fact, I think I can count at least 5 interpretation errors in this one text! Numbers like 1,000, sometimes called the Millennium, are symbolic. They're meant to describe a large number of people or years and not an actual number.

Which brings us to our last, and what might be the most FAMOUS number in the Bible. Any guesses? 666. The number of Satan. There is so much confusion around this number. And a lot of superstition, too. Some of you might be thinking, "I can't believe he showed that number in church! Those screens have now been marked. We've got to throw them away or burn them!"

People have tried to find the numbers 666 in all sorts of things over the years to associate them with Satan. Everyone from the Pope to Napoleon. Ronald Reagan was associated with Satan because his full name, Ronald Wilson Reagan, has 6 letters in each name. It's been used for Barak Obama, Donald Trump, Joe Biden. Pick a president or world leader and someone has made the claim!

People have tried to assign 666 to barcodes and credit cards. COVID Vaccines and Disney. Even Monster Energy Drink because the logo resembles 3 of the Hebrew letters associated with 6. I doubt that Satan is in Monster Energy Drinks, although, I've seen the ingredients and it probably feels like you've got a demon inside of you after drinking one!

But my guess is that when John wrote this letter to persecuted churches in the 1st Century, he wasn't warning them to stay away from Monster Energy drinks, Disney logos, or barcodes. He was using code language to pull back the curtain on something much bigger.

In the 1st Century, there was this technique known as Gematria where numbers would be assigned to letters. In fact, archeologists excavating Pompeii uncovered gematria on a bedroom wall written somewhere around 79 AD. It said, "I love her whose number is 545." We don't know who wrote it, but we can imagine it was some lovesick young man!

Gematria assigns numbers to letters, and when we play with the numbers 6 6 6, the question we should be asking is not, "I wonder who *it will be*?" The question is, "I wonder who John *has* in mind?" There are a few options from John's day, but the most likely is the Emperor Nero. When translated into Hebrew, Nero Caesar, as he was known, adds up to the number 666.

And when you think about all Nero did to persecute Christians and destroy the Church, it starts to make sense. More than that, though, Nero represented the true spirit and character of the Roman empire. The same empire that crucified Jesus and is now murdering his followers if they don't give their total allegiance to the emperor.

So, if you take the symbolism of the number, and the person or system it represents, 666 generically points to any power or system or government that opposes God's ways and God's people. Which makes sense, given where we find it. If you have your Bible open, look at our text.

Revelation 13...(READ vs. 1-8)

- Dragon = Satan
- Beast who rose from the sea = Powers that demand ultimate allegiance.

Introduced to a second beast...(READ vs. 11-18)

- Beast from the earth = Systems that prop up evil powers.

These two beasts of power and propaganda work together for the pleasure of Satan to control and dominate systems and governments in this world to oppose God's ways and God's people. Put another way, The beast is any system Satan uses to demand allegiance to him over faithfulness to Jesus.

And if this is all starting to sound a little weird, I warned you! We're not going to bust out the tin-foil hats, but I do want to take this just a little bit further before we land the plane.

In verse 16, we read that the beasts forced all people to receive a mark on their right hands or foreheads so they could buy or sell. I don't think this mark is a barcode or QR code. The mark of the beast is a symbol of allegiance.

Hearing about marking hands and foreheads would have taken John's original audience back to Deuteronomy 6. It's the most quoted passage in Jewish tradition. I forgot to put it on my outline, but listen to what it says...(READ Duet. 6:4-9)

Again, the symbolic language is for the Word of God to course through their veins, to be at the forefront of their minds. To permeate through their home and family. So much of Israel's identity is found in this passage. This is how they marked themselves as the people of God.

And so, the mark of the beast is not a microchip in your hand or a tattoo on your forehead. The mark of the beast is about who or what you worship. It's about who or what has your loyalty and allegiance. In John's day, you had to worship the emperor to fully participate in the economy. You had to "mark yourself" as loyal to Rome to fit in.

And we are tempted to be "marked" by the beast today when our actions (hands) and thinking (forehead) are shaped more by the values of the culture around us than they are by the values of the Kingdom of God.

The mark shows up on us when we:

Worship power over sacrifice. When we prioritize influence or status or control over humility and serving others. When we exalt powerful leaders or celebrity culture over Christlike meekness.

Compromise truth for acceptance. When we stay silent in the face of injustice to protect our comfort or reputation. When we let cultural values shape our understanding of God's Word instead of God's Word shaping our understanding of cultural values.

These are big ways, but there's small ways, too. The mark shows up on us when we:

Let busyness crowd out what matters most. The beast says, "Hustle harder." Jesus says, "Come to me and rest."

Scroll more than reflect. Filling our minds with social media, news, entertainment and neglect building intentional space for Scripture and prayer.

Follow the crowd instead of Christ. Letting the fear of being different keep you from living with quiet conviction. The beast is subtle, and being marked by him often just looks like going with the flow.

And again, THE question of Revelation is who will you align yourself with? Who will have your allegiance? Aligning with Satan may keep us from some uncomfortable situations, but Jesus has the final word. And these middle chapters in the book of Revelation give us a graphic description of the judgement that God will one day pour out on Satan and evil and all who align with him.

And we can get caught up in all the minutia of God's judgement. When it will happen, how it will happen. But here's the big picture I think John...and Jesus...want us to know.

Judgement: God's elimination of evil. Full eradication of it, once and for all, so that God's people can live in perfect peace.

3: Ultimate expression of something.

7: Perfect, complete.

The middle part of Revelation contains 3 judgements played out in 7 scenes. The 7 seals, the 7 trumpets, the 7 bowls: it all paints a picture of **The ultimate expression of God's perfect and complete elimination of evil from this world.**

In the battle between good and evil, Jesus wins...and it's not even close! Revelation gives us a glimpse into the future, and it all belongs to God.

I think all of these numbers and symbols and images...everything in this book of Revelation, especially the weird stuff, is meant to leave us asking ourselves, "Why would we align with anyone or anything but Jesus?"

God will ultimately make the world right by eliminating evil. And though we may suffer under it for a moment, we will overcome through faithful obedience to Jesus. Until then, **We resist the beast by worshiping the Lamb.**

This is our weapon. This is how we navigate through the darkness of our world. Not by grasping for power and control, but by surrendering to Jesus again and again and again. We worship the Lamb by choosing humility over pride. Living truth instead of chasing approval. We worship the Lamb by saying "no" to convenience and "yes" to faithfulness.

We worship the Lamb by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, and bowing to nothing or no one but Him.

Communion

And one of the most powerful ways we do this is through communion. Communion is a powerful visual declaring whose side we're on. It is an act of defiance against Satan and the evil powers at work in this world, but it is also an act of submission to the One who lived, and died, and lives again.

This meal is a declaration of whose side we're on and a reminder that our allegiance is to Him. Let's take it together.

Invitation

Today, if you feel worn down and tired, I want you to know there is grace for you. Scripture tells us that, when we surrender our lives to Christ, we are marked with the Holy Spirit. We belong to God now and forever. And if you're ready, we're ready for you.