

## Marked Foreheads

By Brad Allison on 8/1/2004

Scripture Reference *Revelation 12-14*

One of the most well-known parts of the book of Revelation is the verse at the end of chapter 13 that tells of the number 666 being put on the forehead of the followers of the beast. I don't think this is a literal mark, but meant rather to describe some clear way of distinguishing between the two groups of the followers of the Lamb and of the beast. Those who don't have the mark of the beast upon them will suffer greatly, from economic deprivation to loss of their lives. We've mentioned before that this book of Revelation is written to a group of Christians who were suffering persecution because of following Christ. Sometimes it took the form of economic persecution. For example, tradesmen would be asked to give offerings for the gods who were supposed to bless their particular trades. When a Christian silversmith would refuse to do so, he would suffer an economic boycott from others and become impoverished. At times, Christians would even lose their lives because they refused to do things like worship the Roman emperor.

Though we know very little of this kind of suffering, it is not completely foreign to us. Someone tells a dirty joke and you don't laugh. A Christian worker gives a full hour's work for a full day's pay and feels pressure from her co-workers to lighten up, because her diligence shows up others. A Christian salesman refuses to misrepresent his product, despite pressure from his boss to do so. These may be small compared to losing your life out of allegiance to Christ, but they are real nonetheless. To be a follower of Christ will lead to persecution and suffering. If it's not happening now, it very well may happen in the future. That's what chapter 13 is all about.

Today, though, we are concerned with the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter, which provides the answer to chapters 12-13. What are Christians to do when following Christ leads to suffering? It may be easy to imagine ourselves able to be strong and to endure as we sit among other Christians in this nice building. But what will be our response when we are feeling all alone and greatly pressured to cave in and deny Jesus in some way? Chapter 14 says that the answer lies in seeing something. We need to have our eyes opened. There is a common word in the book of Revelation that is easy to miss. It occurs a total of 25 times, and appears in verse 1 of this chapter. It's the word that is translated "Behold" in the ESV. The Greek lexicon says this is an interjection. In other words, it's akin to our declaration, "Would you look at that!" The book of Revelation says that this seeing is the solution to all of our problems. It's the closest thing you'll get to a silver bullet that will solve your problems of living life in a fallen world.

There's a common example given of the power of seeing in an exercise where a person is asked to imagine walking on a two by four that is placed on the floor with the wide side up. Most of us could manage to balance ourselves on the three and a half inch side of a two by four. But what would happen if you put that same two by four 60 feet in the air and then tried to walk across it? What looked plenty wide enough when sitting on the solid floor now looks to be maddeningly narrow. The difference is perspective.

The same kind of thing appears in a well-known story out of the Old Testament. In the days of the prophet Elisha, the Syrian army was far more powerful than that of Israel. So the Syrians marched into Israel to lay ambushes for the Israelite army that they might destroy them. But Israel had the best military intelligence possible because Elisha would receive a word from the Lord and tell the king of Israel where the ambush was so his army could avoid that place. After this happened several times, the Syrian king was sure that there was a spy in his midst. But he was told about Elisha, and the king determined to come and take him by force. So a great Syrian army came to Dothan, where Elisha was living at the time, and

surrounded the town early one morning. Elisha's servant awoke to see this vast army and was terribly frightened. When he asked Elisha what they should do, this is what he said. "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:16-17). In other words, between the Syrian army and Elisha was the Lord's army. To have one's eyes opened to see the way things really are spiritually is to be delivered from fear. It is just such an outcome that our chapter intends for us. I want to point out three things that we need to see if we are endure in the face of suffering or persecution or just living in a fallen world.

## I. The Impossibility of a Middle Way

Whenever we're faced with a situation in which we will have to suffer as a result of following Christ, our instinct is to strive for some middle way. We want to be able to avoid suffering and to continue following Christ at the same time. We want to have it all—being liked by everyone and still a follower of Jesus. I just want to point out from this passage how that desire to have it all will not work. There is no middle way of being liked by the world and loving Jesus. Our passage is filled with contrasts that teach us that we must make choices. There is a mark on every forehead, it is the mark of beast (13:16; 14:9), or the mark of the Lamb (14:1). Everyone is a worshipper, either of the beast (14:9) or the Lamb (14:1-5). Everyone will experience the wrath of someone, either of the beast or the Lamb.

Someone has pointed out that a fence serves several useful purposes, but living on top of it is not one of those purposes. You can't stay on a fence between following Jesus and following the way of the world. A decision has to be made.

Illustration: I have read that when Cortez landed at Vera Cruz in 1519 to begin his conquest of Mexico with a small force of 700 men, he purposely set fire to his fleet of 11 ships. His men on the shore watched their only means of retreat sinking to the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico. With no means of retreat, there was only one direction to move, forward into the Mexican interior to meet whatever might come their way. There is a sense in which each of us must make a definitive break with everything else and purpose to worship Jesus only. Burn the boats by putting to rest any thought of returning to something other than Jesus for ultimate satisfaction. Jesus' call to us is to turn our backs on all else and follow him alone. That brings up an important question. Where's he taking us? If the boats are burned and we can't go back, what does the future hold for us?

## II. The Bright Future for the Worshipers of the Lamb

There has been a great deal of discussion surrounding the identity of these 144,000 spoken of in 14:1-5. Remember that numbers are usually symbolic in this kind of literature. That is, he doesn't mean that there were exactly one more than 143,999. Rather, it is a number intended to communicate a message. In short, it represents the complete number of God's people. The number is the result of squaring 12 and multiplying by 1000. The two twelves refer to the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. One-thousand is the number in this book that simply means vastness. So the number is intended to speak of the complete people of God from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, a group which is vast in number.

The significant thing I want us to notice from these verses is what this 144,000 are

doing. They are worshipping God. We've seen before in this book how worship will be our main activity in heaven. Worship is what we were created for. Humans find their highest and best use in this activity. It is incomprehensible to some how worship could be so deeply satisfying as to spend an eternity doing it. Note just a couple of things about this worship.

It will touch us at a deeply emotional level, as indicated by this song that only the redeemed can sing. Most of us have had the experience from time to time of being deeply moved by music. It has the ability to touch us at a deep level. Note the rich texture of this music. It is both powerful and delicate at the same time. Its power is likened to the sound of many waters and of mighty thunder. If you've been to Niagara Falls, think of the sound of those waters. And we've all experienced the sense of awe at loud thunder. This song will carry such a forceful punch. But it will also be characterized by an exquisite delicacy, being likened to the sound of one of the most delicate of all musical instruments, the harp.

But why is it that only the redeemed will be able to sing this song? Is it that we will be given some unique musical ability when we go to heaven, an ability that will surpass that of everyone else? No, it's not that this song will be so musically complicated that only the super-gifted can sing it. Rather, it will be the kind of song that can only come out of those who have experienced the redemption of which we will be singing. One of the problems we have in worship now is that our lips get ahead of our hearts. We can sing and say all the right words, and leave our hearts behind. But in heaven it will not be so. Our experience and our emotions will combine for a joyful experience that we only get small tastes of now.

There is a second description of our worship. Not only will it be deeply emotional, but also characterized by truth. It is said of these worshipers that "in their mouth no lie was found" (14:5). Why is truthfulness singled out here in this description of the worshippers of heaven? Because there is a unique joy that comes when we can be completely truthful about ourselves, no longer trying to cover our sin but admitting the complete truth about ourselves, and still know that we are redeemed. Have you ever had this experience of coming to see that because of what Jesus has done in dying for our sin that we no longer need to cover up and lie about it? We can be completely truthful and completely redeemed at the same time.

Illustration: Brownlow North was something of a Billy Graham figure in the mid-nineteenth century in Great Britain. He was greatly used of God in a revival that occurred then. Before his conversion, he had a sinful past more notorious than most, and when he first attempted the ministry, someone sent to the church authorities a letter detailing this sinful past. In shame, North withdrew his attempts to become a preacher. But then Christ did a significant work in his heart, and he determined to forge ahead in the work of preaching the gospel. During one of these early sermons, he received another letter detailing all of his sins and threatening to expose them all if he continued in his quest of preaching the gospel. His response was to take the letter into the pulpit and read it for all to hear. He then said,

I am the man described here.... It is a correct picture of the vile sinner I once was; and oh how wonderful must the grace be that could quicken and raise me up from such a death and trespass in sins, and make me what I appear before you tonight, a vessel of mercy, one who knows that all his past sins have been cleansed away through the atoning blood of the Lamb of God (*Life of Brownlow North*, London: Banner of Truth, 1961, pp. 46-47).

There is a wonderful joy and freedom that comes when our worship is based on complete truth. We no longer need to cower, fearful that something about us will be found out. The One who knows it all has redeemed us from our sin, and no one can countermand what he has declared to be the case—that we are redeemed and accepted completely. Such will be the joy

of our worship.

### III. The Dark Future for the Worshipers of the Beast

In contrast to the joy of the redeemed who worship the Lamb, the future for those who worship the beast will be quite different. It is spoken of in this text through announcements given by three angels. The first angel announces throughout the whole earth that the hour of judgment has come. The creator and judge of the earth will now judge the earth. The second angel says that he will first judge Babylon, which represents the kingdoms of the earth in rebellion against God. The third angel announces the judgment against the citizens of these earthly rebellious kingdoms. Their judgment will be that of eternal torment. Listen again to these sobering words that describe this judgment. “He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name” (14:10-11). Eternal torment and no rest. Such is the wrath of the Lamb. Everyone must endure either the wrath of the beast or the wrath of the Lamb. Jesus shows the path of wisdom when he said, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

#### CONCLUSION:

Years ago, a Roman coin was found with the picture of an ox on it; the ox was facing two things—an altar and a plough; and the inscription read: “Ready for either”. The ox had to be ready either for the supreme moment of sacrifice on the altar or the long labor of the plough on the farm. I understand that this image was taken up and used by the Baptist Missionary Union. I notice that our text concludes with these same two applications. Verse 12 tells us that we need to be ready to endure long difficulty in service to our Lord, being obedient and full of faith. This world may be full of evil and troubles, but the follower of the Lamb has simply to focus on two things—trusting and obeying his Lord.

The ox also needs to be ready to make the supreme sacrifice, and God calls us to that same readiness. Verse 13 encourages us to this end by reminding us that should God call any of us to be faithful unto death as martyrs for Christ, that “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” Many commentators see in these two chapters a reference to that well-known story in Daniel 3, where Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace because they refused to worship the idolatrous image of the king of Babylon. Do you remember their speech to King Nebuchadnezzar when he asked them who could deliver out of his hands? They said that even if he throws them into his furnace, “our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

One of the reasons the early church grew so rapidly is that the Christians believed this. From time to time in those days, cities would be afflicted by plagues that would kill many. Anyone with the financial means would escape the city during the times of plague in order to save their own lives. But the Christians would go there to care for the sick, with the result that many lost their lives. But they didn't fear such a loss, because their eyes had been opened to see the future blessedness of the followers of Christ. May God open our eyes to see the same!