

God's Seal *or the* Beast's Mark?



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 17:9–11; Exod. 31:13, 17; Rev. 13:17; Eph. 1:13, 14; Heb. 4:9, 10.*

Memory Text: “Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints” (*Revelation 15:3*).

The song of Moses and the Lamb begins with the words of our memory text this week. It is sung by “them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name” as they “stand on the sea of glass” in heaven (*Rev. 15:2*). How can we be among that number?

One of the most telling signs of God's true last-day people is their proclamation of the third angel's message, which warns against receiving the mark of the beast. However, despite there being no more serious warning in all the Bible, many confusing ideas as to what this mark is have been suggested over the years: a bar code in the forehead, a credit card number, or some biometric identification.

We should not be surprised at the proliferation of confusing ideas in Babylon. After all, its name means “confusion.” But God's remnant people need a clear understanding of this topic in order to proclaim the third angel's message with power. This week, we'll try to understand better what the mark of the beast is and how to avoid it—by receiving the seal of God.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 16.

God’s Sign Identifying His People

In Old Testament times there were two outward identifiers of God’s true people. One of them was circumcision. To whom was this sign first given? *Gen. 17:9–11.*

God commanded Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant of salvation. Males were to be circumcised on the eighth day (*Lev. 12:3*). However, this ritual had a deeper significance. It was meant to symbolize the need for “circumcision,” or renewal, of the heart (*see Deut. 30:6*). That is why Paul writes, “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (*Rom. 2:28, 29, NKJV*).

Texts such as 1 Corinthians 7:19, Galatians 5:6, and 6:15 show that in the New Testament, circumcision is replaced by baptism, which symbolizes conversion, a “new creation,” a dying to sin and a rising to a new life (*see Rom. 6:3, 4*). That is why Paul says circumcision is no longer important and that it is “faith working through love” and “keeping the commandments of God” that really matter.

What was the second outward sign that God gave to identify His people, and why was it given? (*Exod. 31:13, 17; Ezek. 20:12, 20*).

Notice that the Sabbath as a sign goes all the way back to Creation (*see Gen. 2:2, 3*), whereas circumcision began only with Abraham. Thus Jesus said, in referring to Genesis, “The sabbath was made for humankind” (*Mark 2:27, NRSV*). It shows that we belong to God—by creation because He made us and by redemption because He justifies and sanctifies us. Thus, although Paul says that circumcision is no longer important, he argues that keeping God’s commandments (which includes the Sabbath) still is important (*see Heb. 4:9*).

How do your thoughts and intentions reveal whether or not you truly have been circumcised in the heart?

The Beast and False Worship

Read the following texts. What do they teach us about the importance of avoiding “the mark of the beast”? *Rev. 13:17; 14:9, 10; 16:2.*

Receiving the undiluted wrath of God, being punished by the seven last plagues, and, in the end, being cast into the lake of fire—all of these things happen to those who bear the mark of the beast. What a contrast to those who refuse the mark of the beast and stand on the sea of glass triumphantly singing praise to God and the Lamb!

What is this mark that no one would want to receive? Clearly, the above verses connect it with false worship. Also, as we saw in a previous lesson, the fourth beast power of Daniel 7, in its latter phase (also depicted as the sea beast of Revelation 13), would “think to change times and laws” (*Dan. 7:25*). One law that it thought to change was the Sabbath, the fourth commandment—the only one of the ten that refers to time and points directly to God as the One who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day” (*Exod. 20:11*).

Significantly, the first angel’s message points us back to this commandment that the beast power tried to change and makes it clear that we are to worship the Lord alone as the Creator. In fact, of the seven verses referring to worship in Revelation 12–14, this (*Rev. 14:7*) is the only one about true worship; the other six warn against falsely worshiping the beast and his image (*Rev. 13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11*). Immediately after the third angel’s description of the fate of those who engage in this false worship, the true worshipers of God are described: “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (*Rev. 14:12*).

In other words, proclamation of these three messages separates all of humanity into two groups: those who worship the Creator by keeping all of His commandments, including the seventh-day Sabbath command, and those who worship the beast and his image. This false form of worship, then, offers an alternative to worshiping the Creator by keeping the Sabbath commandment.

Think more about the connection between worship and loyalty. What aspects of worship are essential in order to show our loyalty to God?

The Seal of God

Like a signature, a seal is used to validate a document. In ancient times it was a stamp pressed onto soft wax or clay to show authenticity or ownership, having the authority of its owner behind it.

What is the seal of God, and how and when is it given? *Eph. 1:13, 14; 4:30; 2 Tim. 2:19; Rev. 7:1–4; 14:1.*

The seal of God is a sign of God’s ownership and protection of His people. Paul describes a sealing in connection with conversion and reception of the gift of the Holy Spirit. He calls this gift a “deposit” or “down payment” given to all believers as an assurance of the complete redemption and future inheritance they will receive when Jesus comes.

The book of Revelation describes another sealing just prior to the Second Advent. This final seal is given to the 144,000 at the time of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain. They have God’s name (or signature) written in their foreheads. Through the Holy Spirit’s work in their lives, they come to reflect God’s character.

Contrast the seal of God with the mark of the beast. What differences between them are mentioned? *Rev. 7:3, 14:9.*

The seal is given to true worshipers of God while the mark is given to worshipers of the beast. The seal is given only in the forehead, indicating a definite choice of the mind to worship God in the way that He has commanded. The mark, on the other hand, is given either in the forehead or in the hand. This means that people may worship the beast for one of two reasons. Either in their minds they agree with it, thinking that they are truly worshiping God, or they don’t agree with it but they go along with it because they are afraid of the serious consequences of not conforming: being unable to buy or sell and eventually being killed (*Rev. 13:17, 15*).

“Those who are uniting with the world are receiving the worldly mold and preparing for the mark of the beast. Those who are distrustful of self, who are humbling themselves before God and purifying their souls by obeying the truth—these are receiving the heavenly mold and preparing for the seal of God in their foreheads.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 216.

The Mark of the Beast

What is this mark that we need to avoid getting? As we saw in an earlier lesson, the fourth beast power of Daniel 7, in its latter phase (also depicted by the sea beast of Revelation 13), would “think to change times and laws” (*Dan. 7:25*). As we have seen already, one law that it thought to change was the Sabbath, or the fourth commandment—the only commandment that points directly to God as the One who “made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day” (*Exod. 20:11*).

Meanwhile, the first angel’s message—pointing the reader back to this same commandment, one that the beast power tried to change—makes it clear that we are to worship the Lord alone as the Creator. Then, after a warning about the fate of those who instead worship the “beast and his image” (*Rev. 14:9*), God’s faithful people are depicted in verse 12.

Read Revelation 14:12. Given the immediate context, how does this depiction of God’s faithful people help us to understand why the Sabbath is so central to final events?

The text reads: “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (*Rev. 14:12*). As we have seen, included in “the commandments of God” is the fourth commandment, concerning the Sabbath, which points to God as the Creator and the One who alone should be worshiped. No wonder, then, that many see the issue of “the mark of the beast” as being directly tied to the question of Sunday worship, a counterfeit “sabbath” that is *not* commanded in the Bible, as opposed to keeping the fourth commandment, which is commanded in the Bible.

Does this mean that Christians who worship God on Sunday have the mark of the beast now? No. According to Revelation 13:15, those who refuse to join in this false worship of the beast will be killed. It will eventually become a life-or-death issue. Obviously, though, events have not yet reached that point, and the mark of the beast will not be given until this final test does come. Therefore, no one has yet received the mark of the beast.

Commandments of God. The faith of Jesus. Why are these traits, even now, crucial aspects of what it means to be a true Christian?

The Sabbath as the Seal

As we have seen, the seventh-day Sabbath has been a sign of God's true people throughout history, beginning with Adam and Eve and continuing during the time of Israel. We also see it perpetuated in the New Testament church with the practice of Jesus and the apostles, and as a distinguishing sign of God's last-day people, who "keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (*Rev. 14:12*).

Why is the Sabbath so important, and what special significance does it have for Christians? *Exod. 20:8–11; Heb. 4:9, 10.*

The Sabbath appears in the heart of the Ten Commandments. It was given by the Creator as a sign or seal of His authority. It identifies Him by name, "the LORD your God." It identifies the realm over which He has jurisdiction—"the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them." It also identifies the basis of His authority, "for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, . . . and rested the seventh day."

The New Testament identifies Jesus as the One through whom God made all things (*John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:1, 2*). Therefore, it is Jesus who created our world in six days and rested on the seventh day. As such, it is highly significant that as Jesus hung on the cross that Friday afternoon, He cried out, "It is finished!" (*John 19:30, NKJV*). Just as He rested on the Sabbath after finishing His work of Creation, so Jesus rested in the tomb over the Sabbath after finishing His sacrificial work by dying in our place for our redemption. So the Sabbath is doubly blessed, first at Creation and then at the Cross. That is why, according to the book of Hebrews, in resting on the Sabbath the Christian shows that he "has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His" (*Heb. 4:10, NKJV*). The Sabbath is a perfect symbol of the fact that we cannot save ourselves, that from start to finish it is Christ's work made possible through faith (*compare Heb. 12:2*).

If the Sabbath symbolizes resting from our works, what does the keeping of Sunday represent, and how does this fit right in with the basic character of Babylon?

Further Thought: “Just as soon as the people of God are sealed in their foreheads—it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved—just as soon as God’s people are sealed and prepared for the shaking, it will come. Indeed, it has begun already; the judgments of God are now upon the land. . . . that we may know what is coming.”—Ellen G. White, *The Faith I Live By*, p. 285.

“The Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty, for it is the point of truth especially controverted. When the final test shall be brought to bear upon men, then the line of distinction will be drawn between those who serve God and those who serve Him not. While the observance of the false sabbath in compliance with the law of the state, contrary to the fourth commandment, will be an avowal of allegiance to a power that is in opposition to God, the keeping of the true Sabbath, in obedience to God’s law, is an evidence of loyalty to the Creator. While one class, by accepting the sign of submission to earthly powers, receive the mark of the beast, the other choosing the token of allegiance to divine authority, receive the seal of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 605.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are ways we can reveal to others the truth about the mark of the beast and the seal of God that don’t cause unnecessary controversy? For instance, why must we emphasize the fact that no one now has the mark of the beast?
- 2 How are the Sabbath and the sealing of the Holy Spirit related?
- 3 Reflect on the above idea of the seal as “a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually.” What does that mean?
- 4 Discuss what characterizes spiritual Babylon, its values and methods. How do they differ from the values of God’s kingdom? How might some of Babylon’s values be creeping into our own church even now? How can we learn to recognize what they are and seek to deal with them in a Christian manner, one that reflects the values of God’s kingdom?

My Husband, My Field

by an Adventist wife in the U.S.

My husband and I always wanted to be Seventh-day Adventist missionaries. We both served as student missionaries in different parts of the world, and we returned overseas as volunteers after marriage.

It was an amazing 10 years. We served in three countries and planted many seeds that God could water later.

But I grew increasingly bothered with my husband. At first, it was small things like always having to adjust his shirt collar. He would make a meal but couldn't remember where to return the ingredients in the cupboard. We would agree on a schedule, but then he would cancel it at the last moment in favor of something that had caught his attention.

I expressed my frustration to my mother by phone. She called me hypercritical and urged me to be a better wife.

My mother changed her mind when we returned from the mission field and lived with her for a while. She saw that my husband would surprise us by washing the dishes, but then we couldn't find where he had put them in the cupboards.

My mother apologized to me, saying, "I'm sorry, honey, because I thought it was just you. But you still need to forgive and respect him."

My husband's heart is always so good. He wants to be helpful. However, when we live with him day in and day out, his efforts are not always helpful but tiring because he creates extra work for the rest of us.

It got to the point that I lost all respect for him. I couldn't trust his word. Not knowing where to turn, I sought the advice of a respected Seventh-day Adventist counselor. As I described my husband's behavior, the counselor stopped me.

"Do you think that it's possible that your husband has ADHD?" he said.

ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, is a disorder related to the executive functions of the brain and is characterized by difficulty paying attention, impulsive behavior, and hyperactivity.

So, 18 years after getting married, I finally understood why my husband acts the way he does. I had to let go of my expectations and realize that God wanted to work on my heart.



I love my husband. We may never be overseas missionaries again, and that's fine with me. Ellen White says, "Our work for Christ is to begin with the family, in the home. . . . There is no missionary field more important than this" (*Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 429).

I have found my mission field.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 14:9*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Learn about the meaning of the seal of God and of the mark of the beast that will characterize, respectively, God’s people and those who worship the beast in the last days of human history.

Feel: Appreciate the spiritual significance of the seal as the sign of a personal and loving relationship with the God he or she worships.

Do: Recommit to the Creator and Savior in order to make sure that he or she will belong to God’s camp instead of the devil’s camp.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Meaning of the Seal

- Ⓐ What does the image of the “seal” represent?
- Ⓑ Why is the “mark” put on the forehead or the hand?
- Ⓒ What is the difference between the seal of God and the mark of the beast?

II. Feel: The Essence of Worship

- Ⓐ Why do we worship?
- Ⓑ Why is faith in Creation an expression of dependence on God?
- Ⓒ Why is Sabbath the sign of true worship?

III. Do: Worship Is Life.

- Ⓐ How should we observe the Sabbath to make it the sign of true worship?
- Ⓑ Why is worship more than just keeping the Sabbath on the right day?
- Ⓒ How does the keeping of the Sabbath affect our daily life?

► **Summary:** The seal of God indicates our belonging to God as our Creator and Savior and is thus a sign of life and hope. The mark of the beast, on the other hand, indicates apostasy and is therefore a sign of loss and death.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Ephesians 1:12–14*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The seal of God is a whole process that involves the work of the Holy Spirit confirming that we “trusted . . . the word of truth” (*Eph. 1:13, NKJV*). This means that the seal is not a magical and arbitrary badge. As with circumcision or baptism, the seal of God is a sign of the covenant between God and His people. This sign reflects an internal state of holiness and relates to the life of faith. The sign is seen in the hearts of God’s people, in the intimacy of their thoughts and sentiments; it speaks about their love for God. It is also seen in the dynamic of their actions, which express the genuineness of their responses to God.

Just for Teachers: This week’s lesson is a part of our preparation for the final struggles that will distinguish between two camps: the righteous and the wicked. The challenge is, therefore, to inform and explain the meaning and the significance of the sign that will identify the righteous (the seal of God), and the sign that will reveal the wicked (the mark of the beast). Examine the role of the Sabbath in that process.

Opening Discussion: Some Christians interpret the mark of the beast literally, for instance, as a bar code, a credit card number, or as some biometric identification. Find a representative of each of these three literal interpretations, and identify the arguments supporting them.

Questions for Discussion: Why do these literal applications of the mark of the beast contradict the spiritual and symbolical perspective of the book of Revelation? What are the clues in the biblical text that suggest a spiritual application of the mark of the beast instead?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: John, the prophet of the book of Revelation, uses a series of images and notions that he borrows from the Old Testament to suggest a striking contrast between those who receive the seal of God as a sign of their belonging to Him and those who receive the mark of the beast as a sign of their allegiance

to the beast. Decode the symbolic language, and discuss the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of receiving the mark “on the forehead or the hand”?
2. What does this procedure imply in regard to the relationship with the beast?
3. What lessons do these images suggest about the crucial issue of worship?
4. What is the place of the Sabbath in this drama that will take place at the end of time?
5. How is the Sabbath related to the seal of God and the mark of the beast?

Bible Commentary

I. The Seal of God (*Review Revelation 7:1–4, 9:4 with your class.*)

In the context of the vision of the seven seals (*Rev. 6:1–8:1*)—immediately after the sixth seal, which opens with the wrath of God (*Rev. 6:17*)—the prophet John sees the “seal of God,” which marks those who will survive the wrath of God (*Rev. 7:3*). This particular seal contrasts with the other seven seals. While the seven seals bring a message of destruction and death, this seal carries the promise of salvation and life. Also, while the other seals signify the idea of confidentiality, this one indicates ownership.

The ancients often placed a seal on merchandise to attest that it belonged to them. This seal consisted of a piece of metal or a precious stone (*Exod. 28:11, Esther 8:8*) wherein the name of the owner or a symbol representing him was engraved. The seal was designed to be pressed on the clay that closed the document or the merchandise. In John’s prophetic vision, the seal is put on the foreheads to save God’s people from the forthcoming disasters (*Rev. 7:3, 9:4*). The prophet Ezekiel refers to the same protective function of the mark on the forehead (*Ezek. 9:4–6; compare with Gen. 4:15*). In this passage in Ezekiel, the seal marks only those who worship the living God, the Creator, to distinguish from those who “were worshipping the sun toward the east” (*Ezek. 8:16, NKJV*).

The vision of Revelation 7 conveys the same meaning. It contains a sequence that hearkens back to the Creation account. In fact, the sequence “the earth, the sea, or the trees” (*Rev. 7:3, NKJV*) is the same as in the Creation story itself (*compare with Gen. 1:9–13*). Thus, the mention of this sequence points to the fact that the seal marks those who recognize God as their Creator, those who belong to Him (*Ps. 24:1, 2; 89:12, 13; 100:3*). To be sealed by God means that we, and everything we have and

are, belongs to Him, the One who created everything.

Consider This: What is the visible evidence that God’s people have received the “seal of God”?

II. The Mark of the Beast *(Review Revelation 13:15, 16; 14:9 with your class.)*

To compete with God and confuse humans, the enemy of God, represented by “the beast,” has also produced his own mark as a sign of allegiance. The book of Revelation describes this mark as being stamped on the right hand or on the forehead (*Rev. 13:16*). This symbol has been borrowed from the book of Deuteronomy, in which it symbolizes faithfulness to the law of God. To ensure that the children of Israel do not forget to keep the words of God and His commandments in their hearts, God resorts to an image: “ ‘You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes’ ” (*Deut. 6:8, NKJV; compare with Exod. 13:9*). Still, today, Jews apply this mnemonic device literally and bind the *tefillin* (“phylacteries”) on the hand and on the forehead to remind themselves of their total submission to the law of God, involving both action (the hand) and thinking (forehead).

Just as the “seal of God” on the forehead is a sign that reminds God’s people to submit themselves to His commandments, the “mark of the beast” on the hand or on the forehead is a sign of commitment that characterizes the beast’s followers. In fact, as the third angel specifies, it is the issue of worship that is at stake here. The warning “ ‘if anyone worships the beast’ ” is explained in the parallel statement “ ‘and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand’ ” (*Rev. 14:9, NKJV*). The Greek conjunction *kai*, “and,” that introduces this statement corresponds to the Hebrew *waw* of explanation (*epexegetical*), signifying the direct connection between worshipping the beast and receiving its mark.

Consider This: Why is the “mark of the beast” a sign of worship? Compare the “mark of the beast” and the “seal of God.” Why is worship the crucial issue of the final phase of the great controversy?

III. The Sabbath, Sign of Worship *(Review Genesis 2:1–3 and Exodus 20:8–11 with your class.)*

Human history began on Sabbath, a time of worship. The Sabbath marks, therefore, the first human worship in history—indeed, the first human response to God’s gift of Creation. It is also significant that the Sabbath, which refers to Creation, occupies the geographic center of the Decalogue. This occupation is also true thematically: the Sabbath refers to both our rela-

tionship with God (as do commandments 1 to 3) and our relationship with our fellow humans (as do commandments 5 to 10).

It is interesting that in ancient covenant documents, the seal was placed in the center to make sure that no one could manipulate or erase the agreement. The place of the Sabbath in the center of the Decalogue is an indication that it was intended to be the seal of the Creator. (See lesson 6, step 2, section III, entitled A Sign of the Times.)

Questions for Discussion:

- ❶ The Sabbath is one of the commandments of the Decalogue that has been challenged (and changed) in traditional Christianity. Why has the Sabbath commandment been, and still is being, challenged?
- ❷ How did the change of the Sabbath affect the relationship between Christians and Jews?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: The seventh-day Sabbath refers to Creation, according to the fourth commandment, while the Sunday of Roman Catholic tradition refers to resurrection. Discuss with your class how these two different explanations for which day to observe have affected their respective ways of thinking.

Application Questions:

- ❶ How should we keep the Sabbath in our families to make it meaningful and to reflect its function as the seal of God?
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- ❷ What is the difference between what is done on Sunday by other Christians and what is done by Seventh-day Adventists on the Sabbath?
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►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Observe and analyze the worship services in your church and compare them with worship services in other churches or religions. Discuss the meaning of worship with your class.

Activities: Prepare a liturgical service for Sabbath that will express the Seventh-day Adventist theology of worship.