

The Impending Conflict



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: Rev. 14:7, 9, 12; Rev. 4:11; Rev. 13:1, 2; Rev. 12:3–5, 17; Rev. 13:11–18.

Memory Text: “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17, NKJV).

There is a relatively new medical device called a biochip or VeriChip, about the size of a grain of rice, that can be implanted in a patient. The biochip contains information about the patient's medical history, which can then be obtained by passing an external scanner across the area where the biochip or VeriChip has been inserted. Some Christians see this as part of a conspiracy to enforce the mark of the beast. For others, the mark of the beast has to do with the bar codes on cans of food, or it is a mysterious number on dollar bills that supposedly adds up to 666. For some it has to do with the Masonic order, the Illuminati, black U.N. helicopters, or the United Nations.

The aim of this week's lesson is to reveal the coming conflict over worship. Satan will challenge God's authority by attempting to undermine God's law. Specifically, the Sabbath will become the center of a global conflict over worship. Satan hates the Sabbath because he hates the Creator. He will use coercion, pressure, and force to break our commitment to Christ. There will be a collision of beliefs over the true and false day of worship. God's final appeal is an appeal to faithfulness to Christ despite persecution, an economic boycott, imprisonment, and a death decree. This week's study emphasizes Jesus' strength to take us through earth's final conflict.

* Study this week's lesson, based on chapters 35 and 36 of *The Great Controversy*, to prepare for Sabbath, June 15.

Revelation's Final Conflict

The message of Revelation is much more than cryptic symbols, strange beasts, and odd images. It speaks of eternal truths given by a loving God to an end-time generation. The conflict between Christ and Satan began in heaven over worship. It will come to its final climax over worship.

Compare Revelation 14:7, 9 with Revelation 4:11. What is the overarching theme of Revelation in this conflict between good and evil?

Throughout Revelation, worship and creation are indissolubly linked. Revelation 14:7 calls us to worship the Lord of all creation. Against the backdrop of evolution, which has taken the world by storm during the past two centuries, the Sabbath is an eternal reminder of our identity. It constantly reinforces that we are created beings and our Creator is worthy of our allegiance and worship. This is one reason the devil hates the Sabbath so much.

Read Revelation 12:17 and Revelation 14:12. How does worshiping the Creator find its final expression?

Worshiping the Creator through keeping the commandments of God stands in direct opposition to worshiping the beast. God will have an end-time people who are loyal to Him despite the greatest opposition and fiercest persecution in history.

"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."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 605.

Revelation 14:12 states that these committed followers of the Savior will have "the faith of Jesus." The faith of Jesus is a faith so deep that it trusts when it cannot see. It perseveres when it cannot understand. It is a gift from Jesus that we receive by faith and will carry us through the impending conflict.

The seventh-day Sabbath is so foundational a symbol of God as Creator that it goes back to Eden itself. Thus, to seek to usurp it, as Rome did (see Dan. 7:25), is to seek to usurp the authority of God at the most foundational level possible, God as Creator. How does this truth help us see why it will be such a controverted point in the last days?

The Coming Crisis

The mark of the beast prophecy in Revelation 13 tells us about the fiercest and very worst stage of Satan's war against God. Ever since Jesus died on the cross, the enemy has known he was defeated, but he is determined to take as many as possible down with him. His first strategy in this campaign is deception. When deception does not work, he resorts to force. He is ultimately behind the decree that anyone who refuses to worship the beast or receive his mark will be put to death.

Religious persecution, of course, is not new. It has been around ever since Cain killed Abel for obeying God's command. Jesus said it would happen even among believers.

Read John 16:2, Matthew 10:22, 2 Timothy 3:12, and 1 Peter 4:12. What did the New Testament church experience, and how does that apply to Christ's end-time church?

Throughout Christian history, persecution was common. It happened in pagan Rome but was especially evident in the vicious persecution of Bible-believing Christians by the medieval church. The mark of the beast is the final link in this hellish chain. Like past persecutions, it is designed to force everyone to conform to a certain set of beliefs and an approved system of worship.

The prophecy indicates that persecution will start with economic sanctions: no one can buy or sell unless they have the mark. Anyone who refuses to receive the mark will eventually be placed under a death decree (*Rev. 13:15, 17*).

The devil already is preparing professed Christians to receive the mark of the beast when the final test comes by encouraging them to make compromises in their lives. When it appears that the whole world is following the beast in wondering admiration (*Rev. 13:3*), suddenly the scene changes, and the prophetic camera focuses on God's people. Revelation 14:12 gives us this picture. "Here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (*NKJV*). God's people live lives of godly obedience. By His grace, they stand firm when everything is shaking all around them. While the world is following the beast, they "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (*Rev. 14:4, NKJV*). By the power of Christ, they triumph over the powers of hell arrayed against them.

As we saw in lesson 9, the central conflict between good and evil is over worship. The beast uses deception and, when that fails, force and coercion.

How quickly now do you allow, if at all, economic considerations to compromise your Sabbath keeping?

Identifying the Beast: Part 1

Read Revelation 13:1, 2. Where does this beast rise from, and who gives it authority?

The book of Revelation identifies the dragon primarily as Satan. Revelation 12:3–5 says the dragon attempted to destroy, “as soon as it was born,” the “male Child,” who was later “caught up to God and His throne” (*NKJV*). It was the devil, working through pagan Rome, who tried to destroy Christ (see *Matt. 2:16–18*). The archenemy of God and humanity works through political and religious institutions to accomplish his purposes.

About this beast power we’re told, “The dragon gave him his power, his throne, and great authority” (*Rev. 13:2, NKJV*). This prophecy was precisely fulfilled hundreds of years later when the Roman emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to what came to be called Constantinople, in modern-day Turkey. This left a power vacuum at the former throne or seat of the caesars, the imperial city of Rome. Thus, pagan Rome gave the beast its seat, or capital city.

Isaac Backus stated, “By removing the seat of the empire to Constantinople, . . . Constantine made way for the bishop of Rome to exalt himself above all men upon earth, and above the God of Heaven.”—*The Infinite Importance of the Obedience of Faith, and of Separation from the World*, p. 16, quoted in Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, vol. 3, p. 213. According to Thomas Hobbes, “the Papacy is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof.”—*Leviathan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 386. A careful analysis reveals that the sea beast of Revelation 13 is an apostate religious power that rises out of Rome and becomes a worldwide system of worship (*Rev. 13:3, 4*). This beast is not a person; it is a religious organization that has substituted the truth of God’s Word for human decrees.

Read Revelation 13:1, 6. What key word is used to identify the beast power?

The Bible defines *blasphemy* in John 10:33 and Luke 5:21 with two examples: (1) a man pretending to be or claiming to be God, and (2) a man claiming the power to forgive sins. These accusations against Jesus were unjust because He is truly God and, therefore, has the right to forgive sins. The Roman Papacy has two distinctive doctrines that the Bible calls blasphemy: its claims that its priests have the power to forgive sins and that the pope has the prerogatives of God on earth.

Identifying the Beast: Part 2

Rather than worshiping the beast, God's people find their greatest joy and highest delight in worshiping Him. Their obedience springs from their heart of love. They are committed to Him because they know how committed He is to them.

Read Revelation 13:5. Write this identifying characteristic in the space below.

Recall from lesson 4 that God gives us a key for understanding prophetic time—one prophetic day equals one literal year (*Num. 14:34, Ezek. 4:6*). Calculating the time period of 42 months mentioned in Revelation 13:5 using the 30-day Hebrew month equals 1,260 prophetic days or literal years.

The Papacy exercised great influence from A.D. 538 to A.D. 1798. But when Berthier, Napoleon's general, took the pope captive in A.D. 1798, the prophetic period of papal supremacy ended, and Revelation's prophecy was fulfilled: "He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity" (*Rev. 13:10, NKJV*). The blow to the Papacy was extremely serious but not fatal. According to Revelation 13:12, the deadly wound would be healed. The Papacy's influence once again would be felt worldwide.

Today, world leaders welcome the pontiff as an ambassador of the church of Rome and visit him regularly at the Vatican. In a world of unprecedented instability, the scene is being set for the Roman pontiff to become the acclaimed moral leader of the world who can bring people together. During his speech on June 6, 2012, to more than 15,000 people gathered in Saint Peter's Square in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI declared, "Sunday is the day of the Lord and of men and women, a day in which everyone must be able to be free, free for the family and free for God. In defending Sunday we defend human freedom."—https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20120606.html (accessed October 10, 2022). *The Great Controversy* clearly reveals where this movement will one day ultimately lead: "Those who honor the Bible Sabbath will be denounced as enemies of law and order, as breaking down the moral restraints of society, causing anarchy and corruption, and calling down the judgments of God upon the earth. . . . They will be accused of disaffection toward the government. Ministers who deny the obligation of the divine law will present from the pulpit the duty of yielding obedience to the civil authorities as ordained of God. In legislative halls and courts of justice, commandment keepers will be misrepresented and condemned."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 592.

However hard it is now to see something like this happening, look at how quickly our world can change. What should these changes tell us about how quickly end-time events can come upon us?

The Beast From the Earth

Read Revelation 13:11–18. How does this second beast differ from the first beast of Revelation 13?

The first beast rose out of the sea; the second beast comes “up out of the earth” (*Rev. 13:11, NKJV*). The sea represents “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (*Rev. 17:15, NKJV*). The earth, then, represents a sparsely populated area of the world. This second beast arises near the close of the prophetic period during which the first beast exercises authority (*Rev. 13:5*). That is, it rises to prominence around A.D. 1798.

The United States precisely fits this description. It declared its independence in A.D. 1776, adopted its constitution in A.D. 1789, and was recognized as a world power by the late nineteenth century.

John continues, “He had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon” (*Rev. 13:11, NKJV*). Horns in Bible prophecy symbolize power. Unlike the first beast, this beast has no crowns on its horns, suggesting it is not a monarchy. The two horns represent the two primary governing principles that are the source of the United States’ power and success—political and religious liberty.

Read Revelation 13:11, 12. What change do you see in this beast, and how does it speak?

This gentle, lamblike nation ultimately speaks like a dragon. It exercises “all the authority of the first beast” (*Rev. 13:12, NKJV*) and abandons its principles of religious liberty, causing “the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast” (*Rev. 13:12, NKJV*). The United States will lead out in requiring everyone on earth to worship the first beast by recognizing the Papacy’s spiritual and secular authority. According to this prophecy, the United States forms an image to the beast—a union of church and state—and it will require everyone to worship this image.

What’s fascinating is that at the time when first identified as this beast power, the United States was nowhere near the military and economic behemoth it was to become and remains now.

Think about the political instability in America today. How might that one day lead to the fulfillment of this prophecy?

Further Thought: Worshiping the beast and its image alludes to Daniel 3, in which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were commanded by the king of Babylon to bow down to a golden image or be thrown into a fiery furnace. Ancient Babylon, modern Babylon—the issue is worship. True worship springs from a mind taught by God's Word, a soul transformed by His love, and a heart filled with His Spirit. Then we will not be "conformed to this world" but live according to God's will, which is found in His Word. That is our only safety!

"God never forces the will or the conscience; but Satan's constant resort—to gain control of those whom he cannot otherwise seduce—is compulsion by cruelty. Through fear or force he endeavors to rule the conscience and to secure homage to himself. To accomplish this, he works through both religious and secular authorities, moving them to the enforcement of human laws in defiance of the law of God."—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 591.

"In order to endure the trial before them, they must understand the will of God as revealed in His word; they can honor Him only as they have a right conception of His character, government, and purposes, and act in accordance with them. None but those who have fortified the mind with the truths of the Bible will stand through the last great conflict."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 593.

"But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain 'Thus saith the Lord' in its support."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 595.

Discussion Questions:

- ① How can we live in the expectation of the coming of Christ and share that hope without becoming alarmists?**
- ② Dwell more on the question of worship. What does our daily life, our daily routine, tell us about who or what we worship?**
- ③ How can we help ourselves and others face the future with confidence and not with fear?**
- ④ What practical difference does understanding last-day events make in our lives today?**

No to Pork, Yes to Sabbath

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Sara thought about the Seventh-day Adventist Church as she helped her mother sell pork and beer in southeast Africa.

Why do Adventists go to church on Saturday? she wondered.

As a small girl, Sara had gone to the Adventist Church several times with her big brother, who was an Adventist. But then he had moved to another town, and she had gone back to the church of her mother.

As she worked with her mother, memories about the Adventist Church returned. She thought about Adventist neighbors who had moved next door. Sara decided to ask them why they went to church on Saturday.

The neighbors welcomed Sara's question, and they opened the Bible to the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8–10. Sara read, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work" (*NKJV*). She also read other verses about the holiness of the seventh-day Sabbath. She saw that Jesus worshiped on the seventh day when He lived on earth. She decided to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.

Mother was furious when Sara told her that she would no longer sell pork and beer on Saturdays. She forbade Sara from going to the Adventist Church. Sara went anyway. She wanted to honor her mother as God commands in the fifth commandment (*Exod. 20:12*). But she also realized that it was more important "to obey God rather than men" (*Acts 5:29*).

Tensions escalated further when Sara stopped selling pork and beer altogether. She explained to Mother that God does not condone the eating of unclean meat, such as pork (*Lev. 11:7*), or the drinking of alcohol (*Prov. 20:1*). Furthermore, she said, the Bible teaches that "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (*1 Cor. 10:31*), and selling products unapproved by God would not glorify Him.

Mother threw Sara out of the house. With nowhere to go, Sara left town and moved in with her Adventist brother and his wife and their sons. Her heart was heavy. *Is this the cost of following Jesus?* she wondered.

Sara's brother presented her case to leaders at his church. Through their efforts, an Adventist pastor met with Mother. She listened carefully to what he said. She didn't agree with him on everything. But her face softened as they spoke. She said Sara could return home.

Today, Mother still does not share Sara's convictions. Sara is praying for the Holy Spirit to touch her heart. She knows that the God who gave her a fuller understanding of His love can do the same for her mother.

Thank you for your Sabbath School mission offerings that help spread the good news of Jesus' soon coming in Africa and around the world.