

THE MARK OF THE BEAST

By Paul Penno, Jr.

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Have you ever gotten angry over some simple thing that didn't amount to anything to speak of? Maybe it was poor service at a restaurant. Or maybe your teen was out late and didn't tell you they were coming in after hours. Or maybe you were driving down the highway and someone cut you off. It was probably for some personal, selfish reason you got angry. Most of the time it is.

How are we to understand God's anger? Why should some obscure issue about a "beast" and its "mark" arouse God's anger so? Wouldn't it make more sense for God to get angry over abortion, genocide, child abuse, terrorism, or drug trafficking?

God seldom gets angry (and when He does, it is a righteous anger that is motivated by His love). Yet Revelation 14:9-11 pictures a white-hot divine anger unlike anything the world has yet witnessed.

And when God gets angry it never has to do with something trivial. Yet, according to these verses in Revelation, the thing that awakens God's anger appears on the surface to be an obscure, irrelevant issue. Let's look at this message of the third angel carefully, for we need to understand the deeper reasons it reveals for such an unusual divine anger.

"Then a third angel followed them [the first two angels], saying with a loud voice, 'If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.'" Revelation 14:9-11.

Why should God's anger be aroused over something so cryptic? Even if we grant that His anger is unselfish and that He is concerned for our good, why would worship of "the beast and his image" trigger such an outburst on God's part? Wouldn't it make more sense for God to get worked up over some of the great social evils that afflict modern society—abortion, genocide, child abuse,

terrorism, or drug trafficking? What is there about “the beast” and “his image” that deserves such divine wrath?

Obviously, there must be more here than meets the eye. Something about the worship of this “beast” is the taproot of these terrible social evils and all the other ills that beset the world. All these things find their source in the spiritual disaster of the “fall of Babylon” as the second angel has announced. See verse 8.

What is so significant about “Babylon” and its spiritual fall?

The book of Revelation and its symbols cannot be understood apart from the light of the New Testament gospel—the event that was the world’s biggest news then and still is today. Consider what happened during the lifetime of Christ’s apostles: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3:16. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us [the Christian church] the word of reconciliation.” 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Can you image a more expensive investment on God’s part? When Christ came, this selfish, sinful world was well on its way to global suicide. God could have abandoned the human race to its well-deserved fate, but His character of love would not allow Him to do so. Jesus’ sacrifice became the focal point of tremendous good news, a gospel of deliverance from selfishness and corruption. Jesus Christ *literally* saved the world. His apostles proclaimed this message so effectively that their enemies complained of them as those “who have turned the world upside down.” Acts 17:6. The healing impact of the gospel was felt worldwide. See Colossians 1:6.

Roman paganism fought this gospel bitterly, cruelly persecuting the early Christians, yet the glad tidings of what Christ had done gave promise of transforming human society. Slavery and gladiatorial contests found themselves on the way out; a new hope and self-respect began to blossom in hearts everywhere. As mankind’s happiness quotient began to rise, God would naturally have been pleased. There was a real hope that life on this planet could become what it ought to be—a heaven on earth.

An attack on God’s dearest objective. But the book of Revelation discloses a startling account of a diabolically clever program devised by God’s ancient enemy, Satan, to counteract this redemption process. Did God intend to make the Christian church the depository of the true saving gospel? Very well, then God’s enemy

would design his counterfeit to assume the form of the Christian church, the better to deceive! The wolf would dress up in sheep's clothing to turn humanity away from the pure gospel. At the same time, Satan would employ the basic principles of terrorism on a global scale, exploiting deception and fear.

Daniel's prophecies picture the agent in this diabolical scheme as a "little horn"—a power growing out of the ancient pagan Roman empire, the fourth beast in Daniel's strange menagerie of kingdoms and powers. See Daniel 7:19-24. In its audacity, this "little horn" power was to "speak pompous words against the Most High, . . . persecute the saints of the Most High, and . . . intend to change times and law." Verse 25. In Daniel 8, a close-up view of this religious-political power reveals the extent of its ambition: "It grew up to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and some of the stars to the ground, and trampled them. He even exalted himself as high as the Prince of the host." Daniel 8:10, 11. Here we have a counterfeit Christ, an antichrist!

Revelation complements Daniel's prophecy. The same power that Daniel pictures as "a little horn" growing out of the fourth terrible beast, John describes in Revelation as a "beast" that derives its power from "the dragon," a symbol that represents the pagan Roman Empire that ruled the world in the days of the apostles. See Revelation 13:1, 2. Obviously, this "little horn" or "beast" is a religious power. It has "a blasphemous name," it receives worship, and it blasphemes God and heaven. See Revelation 13:1, 4-8. This power is out to try to wreck God's salvation program through clever counterfeiting.

"All the world marveled and followed the beast. . . . [vs. 5] And he was given a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies . . . [vs. 6] against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. And it was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." Revelation 13:3-8.

Who is this "little horn" or "beast" power? He can be no newcomer to history, for Revelation 12:6, 14; 13:5 declare that he has already ruled unopposed for 1,260 years. Numerous careful Bible students have recognized the papacy in this Bible prophecy. It fits like a hand in a glove. Notice the impressive evidence.

1. In its historical midstream, the Roman Empire outwardly changed its religion—an unprecedented metamorphosis. It abandoned paganism for a political form of Christianity. The papacy became the new pontifex maximus, the religious reincarnation of the pagan Roman Empire. Spiritually, it absorbed the teachings of paganism while vanquishing it politically. As Revelation says, “The dragon [the Roman Empire] gave him [the beast] his power, his throne, and great authority.” Revelation 13:2.

Theodore Maynard, in his book *The Story of American Catholicism*, pages 37, 38, (a book that has received the imprimatur of Archbishop Francis J. Spellman) declares: “It has often been charged—usually by the narrower sort of Protestant controversialist—that Catholicism is overlaid with many pagan incrustations. Catholicism, it must be added, is ready to accept the accusation—and even to make it her boast. . . . The great god Pan is not really dead; he is baptized.”

2. The papacy claims an audacious authority. A Roman Catholic work says, “The priest holds the place of the Saviour Himself. . . . What only God can do by His omnipotence, the priest can also do by saying ‘*Ego te absolve a peccatus tuis* (I absolve thee of thy sin)’.”—Alphonsus de Liguori, *Dignity and Duties of the Priest*, pp. 34-36. And speaking of the belief that at the words of the priest in the mass the host actually becomes the literal body of Christ, the same writer says, “The priest may, in a certain manner, be called the creator of his Creator.”—Page 32.

According to *Prompta Bibliotheca*, a Roman Catholic encyclopedia, “The pope is of so great dignity and so exalted that he is not a mere man, but as it were God, the Vicar of God.” “The pope is as it were God on earth.”—Vol. VI, pp. 26, 29. In 1894, Pope Leo XIII said, “We [the popes] hold on this earth the place of God Almighty.”

Is it not blasphemy for a mere man to claim such an exalted position? In contrast, Christ Himself designated the Holy Spirit as His true vicar, or representative on earth. See John 14:16-18, 26.

3. The cruelties Rome inflicted for purely religious reasons on so-called heretics or dissenters during the Dark Ages are too horrible to contemplate. It’s true, of course, that Protestants as well often persecuted and tortured to death those who differed on spiritual matters. However, as historian W. E. H. Lecky has written, “It can surely be no exaggeration to say that the Church of Rome has

inflicted a greater amount of unmerited suffering than any other religion that has ever existed.”—*History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, vol. 2, p. 45. The atheistic Communism and the materialistic secularism that exist today are in large part reactions against these intolerant cruelties that have distorted true Christianity.

4. The intent “to change times and law” (Daniel 7:25) is seen in the papacy’s attempt to change God’s sacred law—especially the commandment dealing with holy time. Roman catechisms delete the second commandment (which forbids bowing to images) and abolish the seventh-day Sabbath of the fourth commandment, substituting for it a day anciently dedicated to sun worship.

5. The papal dogma of the “immaculate conception,” decreed in 1854, requires the faithful to believe that the Virgin Mary was miraculously granted a sinless human nature so that she could pass on to Christ a nature different from that of humanity. The apostle John says that denying the true genetic humanity of Christ “in the flesh” “is the spirit of the Antichrist.” See 1 John 4:1-3. The idea of the immaculate conception subtly justifies sin as something impossible for us to overcome in principle as long as we have a sinful nature.

6. True to John’s prophecy, most all the world follows this religious power. Even Muslims and Hindus accept Sunday as the weekly day for rest, and the Pope today is the most beloved potentate on earth.

Could it be that a distortion of Christianity “with many pagan incrustations” is the real root of the world’s ills and corruptions? If God’s pure, unadulterated gospel is the divine plan for the world’s salvation, then the answer has to be “Yes.” A distortion of that gospel would be the counterfeit that God’s enemy would use to undo the divine purpose.

The world has all but forgotten the bitter lessons of the Dark Ages. The Right Reverend John Moorman, Anglican leader, has said that if final unity among the churches ever comes about, “there will have to be a central head of the church, and that head will clearly have to be the bishop of Rome.” In 1979 Billy Graham declared that the pope is the proper person to head up a union of all the churches. With the threat of world destruction hanging over our heads either from nuclear disaster or from our own crime and drug obsessions, humanity everywhere senses the need for security, morality, and a

renewal of spiritual life. Increasingly, the world looks to the Roman pontiff as its best hope.

The American connection. The papacy once suffered a “deadly wound” when its 1,260-year political power was taken away in 1798. See Revelation 13:3. Now both Catholic and Protestant religious leaders see some form of a revived church-state union as the only hope of imposing legislative and political control over the forces of evil that threaten to extinguish civilization. Increasingly, sincere persons are coming to feel that they have no choice but to abandon the principles of religious liberty enshrined in the American Constitution if they are to preserve society.

They have forgotten, apparently, how the proclamation of the pure gospel, free of any political entanglements, once “turned the world upside down.” A revival of New Testament godliness in the Christian church would stem the tidal wave of iniquity as nothing else can do. But a return to the principles that held sway in the papacy of the Dark Ages will provide only superficial and temporary relief.

As incredible as it may seem, Revelation reveals that the world will finally reject its only true Divine Friend and Redeemer and, with eyes wide open, return to the pagan-papal deceptions that characterized its darkest history. It’s as if humanity deliberately scuttles its only hope. To make such a mistake in a time of historical innocence is one thing. But to repeat it in a time of mature, unprecedented enlightenment is another.

But bad as this is, it is not the reason that God’s anger will blaze forth as described in the message of the third angel. A revival of church-state union patterned after the Dark Ages model will inevitably reinstate persecution in religious matters. The object will be to wipe out every true follower of the Lamb.

In Revelation 13:11 we see “another beast coming up out of the earth,” a last-day world power that will arise out of an uninhabited area. This power will have two lamblike horns, but will later speak like a dragon—it will be committed to the pure, harmless principles of civil and religious liberty only to subsequently repudiate those principles and support the papacy in a final frenzy of persecution. See verses 11, 12.

“I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly

wound was healed. . . . And he deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. . . . And [he will] cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. And he causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.” Revelation 13:11-17.

While the first beast, the papacy, was going “into captivity” at the end of the Dark Ages, this other infant world power was seen “coming up . . . like a lamb.” Verses 10, 11. In 1798 the French general Berthier took the pope a prisoner and effectively ended his temporal power in 1798. Observers thought that the papacy was dead forever.

What even triggered this sudden amazing reversal of fortune for the papacy? A seemingly insignificant revolt thousands of miles away on a new continent—a Declaration of Independence signed on July 4, 1776 in the thirteen weak British colonies. This bold step set in motion a train of liberation struggles that has continued worldwide ever since.

But by its inspired Constitution, the American nation has led the world in the defense of civil and religious liberty. The world would be an incomparably sadder place today had the 1776 Revolution failed. This new nation and its Constitution have become literally the last, best hope of mankind. In his inaugural address, George Washington said, “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are . . . staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”

But according to Revelation, mankind’s noblest experiment that began “like a lamb” will at last change its character and speak “like a dragon.” Forgetting the lessons of the past, the people of this nation will eventually repudiate the cardinal principles of their Constitution and tell “those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast.” Revelation 13:14.

Ruin can come only from within. God has signally blessed America during her two centuries. This country’s principles of liberty have resulted in unprecedented prosperity and power. But when America turns her back on the constitutional principles of freedom

that have made her what she is, such a step will be national apostasy followed by national ruin.

There is a reason for God's anger as revealed in the message of the third angel: such apostasy will mislead the entire world and bring persecution on His people who choose loyalty to Him over an almost irresistible pressure to conform. The decision to wipe out those who insist on remaining faithful to God will trigger the fearful display of divine wrath because it will be a repetition of the crucifixion of His beloved Son, this time in the person of his saints. Jesus regards oppression of "the least of these My brethren" as directed against Himself. See Matthew 25:40. This will be the real issue when the mark of the beast—the sign that identifies those who have sided with God's opponents—is enforced.

Thus an apparently minor detail of persecution will open the floodgates because it will be a conscious, deliberate choice to unlearn all the lessons of history. The mark of the beast appears on the surface to be a trivial issue. Multitudes will accept it because it will seem so innocuous. But it will be a flag or sign of rebellion against the world's only hope—the true Christ.

The papacy claims that the homage that Protestants pay to Sunday keeping is in reality an obeisance to the Roman Church. Says Father Leo J. Trese: "Nothing is said in the Bible about the change of the Lord's day from Saturday to Sunday. We know of the change only from the tradition of the [Roman Catholic] Church—a fact handed down to us from earliest times by the living voice of the Church. That is why we find so illogical the attitude of many non-Catholics, who say that they will believe nothing unless they can find it in the Bible and yet will continue to keep Sunday as the Lord's day on the say-so of the Catholic Church."—*The Faith Explained*, 1971, p. 243.

Interest in a weekly religious rest day is destined to become increasingly popular. When Catholics and Protestants unite to enforce the observance of a day based only on the "say-so of the Catholic Church," we can know that the prophecy of Revelation is about to be fulfilled. The spiritual and temporal revival that was supposed to come as a result of setting liberty aside will not happen. Instead, says Scripture, Babylon will sink like a millstone thrown into the sea. See Revelation 18:21. Scripture makes it plain that "those who dwell on the earth" will unite to "make an image to the beast." Revelation 13:14. This step of apostasy will not be the act of a few

seizing power illegally; it will be the will of the people in an obviously democratic process.

This is why the third angel sounds such a solemn warning. God's mercy has always been extended to the oppressed multitudes innocently suffering at the hands of those who have seized power. But in this last-day crisis, according to Revelation, the people will deliberately, willingly, knowingly walk backward into the oppression of the Dark Ages, and it will happen during the age of greatest scientific enlightenment the world has known.

In the past, God has always forgiven tragic mistakes, and hope has sprung anew from the ashes of ruin that nations and cultures have brought upon themselves by their own folly and sin. In all past wrath, God has always remembered mercy. But the last apostasy will be the ultimate one, and it will be irreversible, the final step beyond the hidden line of God's patient mercy, because America is indeed "the last, best hope" of mankind.

The final issue is not an inconsequential altercation about whether one day of the week is better than another. It will be an issue of loyalty to the One who died upon a cross and who redeemed us by His sacrifice. To accept "the mark of the beast" is to wave a flag of rebellion against all that he died to accomplish. Heaven will view this final, total rejection as the last drop that fills a cup of iniquity to overflowing.

Good news in the third angel's message. The message of the third angel will accomplish its purpose in gathering and nerving a people to stand firm in the face of a sophisticated terrorism perfected beyond anything the world has yet seen. A bald decree that "as many as would not worship the image of the beast [should] be killed" might be relatively easy to resist. But the subtle prolonged pressure of an economic coercion ("no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark . . . of the beast") will touch everyone's inner fear of want and starvation where it hurts most. Our next breath, almost, is dependent on our being able to buy and sell.

But the message of the third angel is predominantly *good news*. It provides deliverance from the terror that underlies the threat of "the mark of the beast." Coercion by force is the method of the power opposed to God. Love alone is the Lamb's method. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." 1 John 4:18. The fruitage of the third angel's message is a group of people "who

keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” Revelation 14:12. Thus they have learned self-sacrificing love, for only such “love is the fulfillment of the law.” Romans 13:10.

And so we return to the Hero of the book of Revelation—the crucified Lamb. He took upon Himself “the likeness of sinful flesh,” and was tempted even as we are, “yet without sin.” Romans 8:3; Hebrews 4:15. In Gethsemane He cried out, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.” Matthew 26:39. On His cross He pleaded, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Matthew 27:46.

In Ernest Gordon’s *Miracle on the River Kwai* is told a story of Scottish soldiers, forced by their captors to labor on a jungle railroad. Things had degenerated into barbarous behavior, but one afternoon something happened.

A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot. It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first check point.

The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! The incident had a profound effect. The men began to treat each other like brothers. When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, human skeletons, lined up in front of their captors and instead of attacking their captors insisted: “No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness.” Sacrificial love has transforming power.

Those who appreciate what it cost Him to redeem our souls will be sustained by His grace. He has promised that not a hair of our heads will perish. Ours will be the supreme joy of honoring Him in the final crisis. In doing so, we will realize, by His grace, the most glorious achievement human beings can ever know.

The next meeting is “Prophecy Predicts a Home for You.”