

THE MARK OF THE BEAST AND THE SEAL OF GOD

By Paul Penno Jr.
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Were Christians involved in the Holocaust? There are stories of heroic efforts by some Christians to rescue or to hide Jews who were being pursued by the ruthless Nazis who wanted to kill them. But the sad truth is that in many cases Christian churches or organizations were strangely silent. Hitler himself was the son of Christian parents and a choirboy in his youth. Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, were strangely silent in protesting publicly against what the Nazis were doing.

Most Christians in Germany were very vocal in their shouting "Heil Hitler!" and keeping in step with the crowds. It was not easy to swim against the Nazi current in the stream. In reading about the horror that was Nazism one wonders what they would have done had they been in Germany at that time. Would you have had the courage to stand all alone for what I knew was right? At the cost of imprisonment, ridicule, torture, death?

God tells us in Ex 23:2, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil." The GNB says, "Do not follow the majority when they do wrong or when they give testimony that perverts justice." It's easy to obey that commandment when we live in a society that respects minority opinions being expressed; but what would you do in a society that condemns minority views? Ridicules you? Puts you down?

We see a vivid glimpse of ourselves in the experience of Peter: afraid of the crowd, so he denies Jesus. How many "Peters" were there in Nazi Germany who were afraid to stand alone and face persecution with the Jews? How many "Peters" are there among us who will someday go along with the crowd and support the mark of the beast when it is popular to do so? If you feel like I do, you will want to get on your knees and plead, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" and plead with Him, "Please Lord, save me from myself!"

In the book of Revelation, we read that we must come face to face with the final issue of the seal of God or the mark of the beast (13:11-18; 14:8; 15:1-3, etc.). So terrible will be the ultimate breakdown of societal norms due to widespread abandonment of the law of God, that the people will demand that government make laws enforcing a popular form of religion that tramples on the God-given rights of minorities. The enforcement of a national Sunday law will herald desperate attempts to halt society's slide into moral suicide.

But a phenomenal development has taking place: significant numbers of seventh-day Sabbath observers [the Worldwide Church of God and some Seventh-day Adventists] have turned militantly against the observance of the Sabbath. Pastors who once taught observance of the Sabbath have joined with the Pope in "new covenant" arguments against it. History records no similar movement in the past 2000 years!

Their basic argument against the Sabbath is their understanding of the New Covenant which, appeals

to people weary of legalism. Their arguments are subtle, calculated to overthrow the Sabbath faith of anyone who does not understand the Bible teaching of the two covenants. In other words, the phenomenon we now face is coercive pressure to overthrow the seventh-day Sabbath with distortions of Bible teaching on the two covenants, *before* the final test of civil legislation in the mark of the beast! One entire church that formerly observed the seventh-day Sabbath has now turned against it, embracing the pope's arguments (the World Church of God). The movement is like an avalanche that sweeps everything before it, unless one is rooted and grounded in the truth of the two covenants.

How can one understand the way God so often threatens His people of old? Why that seemingly endless conflict? Why the almost constant unpleasant tension between Him and His people? Actually, you don't see it until you come to Exodus 19.

In Genesis there's a pleasant relationship between God and His people, for example, God making those fantastic promises of "blessings" galore to Abraham and his descendants, and His tender dealings with Isaac and Jacob. He writes His holy law on their hearts.

Then suddenly, a change: He must write it on tables of stone amid thunder, lightning, trumpet blowing, earthquakes, and a fearful death boundary around Mount Sinai. And almost from then on, rebellious, backsliding people slipping back into pagan worldliness right up into Malachi, until finally we get to Matthew where they crucify their Lord of

glory. What happened in Exodus 19? The people themselves formed the old covenant (vss. 4-8), whereas Abraham had believed the new covenant. The new one is the one-sided promise of God; the old is the "faulty" promise of the people. That's why a major portion of the Bible is the "Old Testament" (or covenant), leading us back to where Abraham was—to be "justified by faith" under the new covenant (Gal. 3:24). Let's make the new covenant clear to our children!

How can one stand firm in the mark of the beast issue? The truth is simple and clear: (a) God's covenants are never contracts, they are unilateral promises on His part, backed by His solemn oath (Gen. 15:5-18). (b) He promises to write His ten commandments on the heart, "causing" His people to walk in the path of obedience (Ezek. 36:25-27); that is the New Covenant. The ten commandments become God's ten promises of liberty (Ps. 119:45)! (c) The unbelieving people instituted the Old Covenant by their vain promise to obey (Ex. 19:8). (d) The faith of Abraham is the proper response to God's promises (Gal. 3:6, 7). (e) "Faith" is a heart-melting appreciation of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Rom. 10:10). (f) It motivates to complete obedience (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

The shape of things to come is becoming more sharply focused day by day. Two world movements are aligning themselves for the last great conflict: the "beast" of Revelation 13 (same as the little horn of the fourth beast of Daniel 7), versus the third angel's message of Revelation 14:6-12. Those who accept the latter will worship the Lamb, the Christ of

the cross who by His sacrifice “tasted death for every man.”

And those who worship the beast and his image will worship self. The self-righteousness of the old covenant will be the worship of the beast, and the imputed and imparted righteousness of Christ will be the worship of the Lamb. One will be faith in the promises of God, the other will be the “righteousness” of human promises. One will appreciate the breadth, depth, length and height of “the *agape* of Christ which passeth knowledge” (Eph. 3:14-21), and the other will become a false view of the cross, a counterfeit misrepresentation of the gospel which will be the worship of a false “christ.”

And so clever will the deceptions be that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). We are told by an inspired prediction that in that final hour “a great proportion” of those who “now appear to be genuine” will “betray sacred trusts,” and take their side with the avowed enemies of the truth. “When the law of God is made void, and the church is sifted by the fiery trials that are to try all that live upon the earth, a great proportion of those who are supposed to be genuine will give heed to seducing spirits, and will turn traitors and betray sacred trusts. They will prove our very worst persecutors. ‘Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them;’ and many will give heed to seducing spirits.

“Those who apostatize in time of trial will bear false witness and betray their brethren, to secure

their own safety. They will tell where their brethren are concealed, putting the wolves on their track. Christ has warned us of this, that we may not be surprised at the cruel, unnatural course pursued by friends and relatives.”¹

If this present generation is the last before the second coming of the true Christ, the Holy Spirit must be calling us to sober thinking. Is it really possible that old covenant thinking can lead at last to final apostasy? Well, the answer is that it certainly did so for ancient Israel. It led them to crucify their true Messiah.

Could anything be more important than for us to learn now what it means to “worship the Lamb”? To “glory” in nothing “save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14)? How to “survey that wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died . . .”? To appreciate what it cost Him to save us? Humble, contrite hearts will worship the Lamb; proud, self-satisfied ones (“rich and increased with goods”)—the beast and his image.

There is a very sober warning in the Bible that it seems it is easy for us to forget. It’s in Rev. 14:9-12. “If any person worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his right hand or in his forehead, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God . . .” Then chapter 15 goes on to speak of those who have met this great challenge and have accepted that third angel’s message, and have “gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of

¹ Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, p. 197.

his name” who stand on the sea of glass singing the song of the Lamb forever and ever.

In fact, the entire Book of Revelation is concerned about this issue—the mark of the beast. Chapter 7 describes that same group who sing the song of the Lamb as those who have received the seal of God, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel” (Rev. 7:3, 4).

In the Bible, a “seal” is interchangeable with a “mark.” So the Book of Revelation tells us that in the last days just prior to Jesus’ return in the clouds of heaven, the entire population of the earth will be divided into two groups: those who receive that “seal of God” and those who accept that “mark of the beast.” Pretty serious, isn’t it?

Revelation 13:8 says that “all that dwell upon the earth” will worship the beast with the sole exception of those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life. It’s another crisis which in principle is the same that the people faced when Jesus was here on earth. They were divided into two groups—those who believed He was the true Messiah as He claimed, and those who rejected Him. He asked them, “What think ye of Christ?” (Mt. 22:42). They *had* to decide!

And so today, you and I *have* to decide between the mark of the beast and the seal of God. But the issue is far, far deeper than a superficial, skin-deep

outward sign. “The third angel’s message in verity” is the true message of righteousness by faith; it will lead to receiving the seal of God. A false, legalistic view will lead to the mark of the beast. It’s time for serious study!

Is it possible that sinners (like all of us are born to be!) can overcome sin and become truly Christ-like in character? Can “the righteousness of the law” (perfect obedience, perfect loyalty) ever be achieved in this life?

The Bible quite clearly says: “all have sinned, and continue [present tense] to come short” (Rom. 3:23). Our very nature is sinful; and even “saints” can’t help showing that they are sinners. Nobody is perfect. So is perfection of character an impossible dream?

The Bible insists on a Good News answer—Yes! God sent His beloved Son into the world on the special mission to “save His people *from* their sins,” not *in* them (Mt. 1:21). Rom. 8:3, 4 says that He was “sent . . . to condemn sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

The word “righteousness” used there means the righteous character of those who “walk after the Spirit.” (It’s *dikaionata*, the imparted righteousness of saints, Rev. 19:8, whereas *dikaionune* always is the imputed righteousness of Christ). Heb. 13:21 says that the Saviour will “make you perfect in every good work to do His will.” And Rev. 14:1-5 describes a people at the close of time who “are without fault before the throne of God,” who “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” Not part way, but totally. They will refuse “the mark of the beast”

and will receive “the seal of God” (Rev. 13:16, 17; 7:1-4).

Are they fanatics? Extremists? Strait-laced grumpy “saints”? No way! Jesus got in on the perfection debate Himself on the Good News side. He said: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). In saying so, He gives us the key to unlock the perplexity. His context is learning to love like the Father loves, who sends His rain and sunshine on the just and on the unjust, who loves bad people, even His enemies.

Jesus’ idea of “perfection” is simple: learning to love like that! John learned the idea from Him, for he also says that if you’ve learned to love like that, you “know God,” you’re “born of God,” He “dwells in” you, you have “His Spirit,” and you yourself “dwell in God.”

Furthermore, you overcome fear (which goes along with sin), and you end up “perfect” (see 1 Jn. 4:7-18). True, you and I were born totally bereft of such love (*agape*); but there’s a filling station where the Holy Spirit “sheds it abroad in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5). Or to change the metaphor, it’s the simple matter of going to school to learn it, “the school of Christ.” The “best,” proudest person must matriculate through the kindergarten.

There was an Augsburg “accord”: Roman Catholic and Lutheran congregations worshipping together, pastors exchanging pulpits, “we all agree,” “let’s be one.”

But Revelation 14 paints a prophetic picture of very sharp “Christian” controversy in the last days just before the second coming of Christ. The angel

from heaven proclaims “the everlasting gospel” (vs. 6), which of course is justification by faith. In contrast, “Babylon is fallen” (vs. 8), and spiritual warfare between those who favor “the mark of the beast” and the “saints” who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of the Jesus” (vs. 9-12).

The “beast” is a religious power who counterfeits the gospel (Rev. 13:5-8), the grand deception of the last days (Mt. 24:23, 24). (And “let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall,” 1 Cor. 10:12). Paul says there are two gospels: one is “the truth of the gospel” and the other is “another gospel, which is not another,” but is an exceedingly clever counterfeit (Gal. 2:5; 1:6, 7).

The counterfeit “sits in the temple of God” (2 Thess. 2:3, 4), thus deceiving multitudes (Rev. 13:8). Very earnestly Jesus pleads with us, “Take heed lest any man deceive you” (Mk. 13:5). The worst fate that could possibly befall you would be for Jesus to come the second time and catch you in the act of supporting the counterfeit! A clever enemy is bent on one purpose: “if possible deceiving the very elect” (Mt. 24:24).

What’s the difference between “the truth of the gospel” kind of justification by faith and the clever counterfeit?

Careful study brings one to the conclusion that the ultimate issue will be the message of justification by faith, because the three “angels” that proclaim the final message will be presenting “the everlasting gospel” (14:6, 7; the second and “third” follow the first). That being so, the underlying issue in this

great conflict between the seal of God and the mark of the beast must be the Good News of salvation by grace through faith—the best Good News anyone can hear.

Amazingly, the great Enemy of righteousness will so confuse and deceive the world that multitudes will accept a counterfeit “righteousness by faith” so cleverly devised that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Mt. 24:24). It will be necessary to distinguish between “the sign of the cross” and the reality of the cross. A correct understanding of “the truth of the gospel” means a true heart-appreciation of what the Son of God accomplished by His sacrifice.

Then the bottom line finally emerges: it’s a sin to be deceived! In fact, in the final scene of the great drama, the believing of the deception of the mark of the beast will constitute the unpardonable sin which will call for ultimate judgment (see Rev. 14:9-11).

Wow! This looks like serious business! Understanding the gospel of justification by faith is “better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it. . . . yea, [it is] durable riches and righteousness” (Pr. 8:11, 18).

There are many differences, but look at the results of believing either one or the other: the genuine experience of justification by faith makes the believer obedient to all “the commandments of God” (Rev. 14:6, 12). It reconciles the heart to His righteousness, which is total obedience to His holy law, a crucifixion of self “with Christ” (Gal. 2:20). In contrast, the counterfeit justification by faith cleverly appears to be genuine by approving of obedience

to nine of the ten commandments but insists on disobedience to one that in effect nullifies them all (see James 2:10-12), and thus leaves the so-called “believer” ignorantly devoted to the worship of self. It is modern Baal-worship, which is worship of self disguised to look like worship of Christ—in principle the nemesis of ancient Israel.

The last message that the God of heaven sends to this dark world. It’s a three-fold message in Revelation 14 and then amplified further in chapter 18 when the message swells to a loud cry and the entire earth is to be lightened with its glory. Much as we all dislike controversy and tension, this three-fold message will arouse the most intense opposition of any in history, resulting in a polarization of humanity into two opposing groups: those who truly keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, and those who will constitute a “Babylon” in rebellion against God by accepting and enforcing what is called “the mark of the beast.”

This crisis will be brought about deliberately by the work of the Holy Spirit, and no one will be able to stop it happening. And the three-fold message will not be a triumphalist call to legalism but a revelation of what Christ accomplished for humanity by His sacrifice. This is evident by the fact that some 25 times He is portrayed in Revelation as “the Lamb,” and the final “harvest” will be a people “who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” (14:4).

He is revealed in Revelation as “a Lamb as it had been slain . . . from the foundation of the world” (5:6; 13:8). The call to “worship Him” results in a

vast throng who sing from the depths of their hearts, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, . . . Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him who sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever” (5:12, 13). No one will ever sing such a song unless his/her heart has been humbled into the dust by a realization of what it cost that Lamb of God to save us, who “has redeemed us to God by [His] blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (5:9; cf. 14:6, 7).

Clearly, the message that is to lighten the earth with glory will be about Christ and Him crucified, about “His blood.” “When I survey the wondrous cross, . . . I pour contempt on all my pride.” That’s the essence of the third angel’s message.

Governor George W. Bush of Texas has granted a reprieve of a month for Ricky McGinn, a convicted and re-convicted murderer of a 12 year old girl. He spared the condemned man’s life (temporarily) within a half hour of his execution in the death chamber. Perhaps the judicial system somehow failed in his murder conviction? Every effort will be made, the governor says, to find the DNA truth. Thank God for justice! Or at least, sincere efforts to find it. In this case one man’s physical life is at stake; but history records millions of cases of people “slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held,” subjects of gross injustice. In Revelation 6:10, 11 they are pictured as crying out with Job, “O earth, earth, cover thou not my blood!” “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that

dwell on the earth?” The same Book of Revelation tells of a coming time when there will be massive injustice perpetrated in the enforcement of “the mark of the beast.” It will be the time when Isaiah 59 will be fulfilled, “None calleth for justice, nor any pleadeth for truth. . . . We look for judgment but there is none. . . . Judgment is turned away backward, and justice standeth afar off: for truth is fallen in the street, . . . and he that departeth from evil maketh himself a prey” (vss. 4-15). The Nazi Holocaust is an example of what mass hysteria can do when the public decide to “trust in vanity.” In the case of “the mark of the beast,” it will be injustice in religion, persecution based on a misreading of the Bible to condemn all who have received “the seal of God” instead of “the mark of the beast.” Scholars and theologians will support the “mark of the beast,” and their specious arguments will be received by all who today have “received not the love of the truth” (2 Thess. 2:10). Multitudes under popular pressure will follow Peter in denying Christ (He says “I am the truth”!). But God will have a people who are loyal to truth though the heavens fall. You and I may well be tested today without our realizing that we are already in the dock. For sure, the test will come “in such an hour as ye think not” (Mt. 24:44). “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

In the Bible study lesson millions will be pondering this week-end there is the question of whether God will be judged by the universe. Or is “judgment” all one-sided with Him arbitrarily judging us? This is a

serious issue because a mistaken idea here can influence a person's spiritual experience and motivate him/her to serve "God" because of fear. If such craven fear becomes the deepest motivation of our hearts, then our "Christianity" degenerates to become little better than paganism. Someone may ask, What difference does it make, whether "obedience" is motivated by fear or by love so long as it "obeys the law"? The difference will show up in the final test of the "mark of the beast." All fear-motivation will then program us to accept the mark of the beast rather than the seal of God because the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:13-18; 16:2) will be based entirely on fear (the ultimate root of paganism). We MUST find a better motivation. And that will require a clearer understanding of the character of God.

He does not want anyone to serve Him because of fear, because such fear would be for Him a hollow victory. Billions of people bowing low before Him because they are afraid of Him and His retributive judgment would bring Him no joy. He wants deep sincerity. Therefore Christ as the Son of God must humble Himself, make Himself vulnerable, become open and transparent, surrender Himself to the judgment of His creatures,—in short, die upon a cross apparently forsaken by God, suffer the pangs of hell itself, drain the last drop of fear in order to disarm and condemn it forever. According to Revelation 14:6-15, God must submit Himself to the judgment of the universe, "for the hour of His judgment is come." Only thus can Satan, sin, and fear be finally and totally conquered, "because fear

hath torment." The universe at last will see that "God is *agape*," and "*agape* casteth out fear" (1 Jn. 4:8, 18). You and I can overcome it only by permitting the Holy Spirit to "shed abroad in our hearts" this "*agape* of God" (Rom. 5:5). Each must ask himself, Am I pagan or Christian?