

How to use Explore



In this issue

The 90 daily readings in this issue of *Explore* are designed to help you understand and apply the Bible as you read it each day.

It's serious!

We suggest that you allow 15 minutes each day to work through the Bible passage with the notes. It should be a meal, not a snack! Readings from other parts of the Bible can throw valuable light on the study passage. These cross-references can be skipped if you are already feeling full up, but they will expand your grasp of the Bible. *Explore* uses the NIV2011 Bible translation, but you can also use it with the NIV1984 or ESV translations.

Sometimes a prayer box will encourage you to stop and pray through the lessons—but it is always important to allow time to pray for God's Spirit to bring his word to life, and to shape the way we think and live through it.

We're serious!

All of us who work on *Explore* share a passion for getting the Bible into people's lives. We fiercely hold to the Bible as God's word—to honour and follow, not to explain away.

1
Find a time you can read the Bible each day

2
Find a place where you can be quiet and think

3
Ask God to help you understand

4
Carefully read through the Bible passage for today

5
Study the verses with *Explore*, taking time to think

6
Pray about what you have read

the goodbook
COMPANY

Opening up the Bible

Welcome to Explore

Being a Christian isn't a skill you learn, like carpentry or flower arranging. Nor is it a lifestyle choice, like the kind of clothes you wear, or the people you choose to hang out with. It's about having a real relationship with the living God through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that this relationship is like a marriage.

It's important to start with this, because many Christians view the practice of daily Bible-reading as a Christian duty, or a hard discipline that is just one more thing to get done in our busy modern lives.

But the Bible is God speaking to us: opening his mind to us on how he thinks, what he wants for us and what his plans are for the world. And most importantly, it tells us what he has done for us in sending his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. It's the way the Spirit shows Jesus to us, and changes us as we behold his glory.

The Bible is not a manual. It's a love letter. And as with any love letter, we'll want to treasure it, and make time to read and re-read it, so we know we are loved, and discover how we can please the One who loves us. Here are a few suggestions for making your daily time with God more of a joy than a burden:

☑ *Time:* Find a time when you will not be disturbed, and when the cobwebs are cleared from your mind. Many people have found that the morning is the best time as it sets you up for the day. If you're not a "morning person", then last thing

at night or a mid-morning break might suit you. Whatever works for you is right for you.

☑ *Place:* Jesus says that we are not to make a great show of our religion (*see Matthew 6:5-6*), but rather, to pray with the door to our room shut. Some people plan to get to work a few minutes earlier and get their Bible out in an office or some other quiet corner.

☑ *Prayer:* Although *Explore* helps with specific prayer ideas from the passage, try to develop your own lists to pray through. Use the flap inside the back cover to help with this. And allow what you read in the Scriptures to shape what you pray for yourself, the world and others.

☑ *Share:* As the saying goes: *expression deepens impression*. So try to cultivate the habit of sharing with others what you have learned. Why not join our Facebook group to share your encouragements, questions and prayer requests? Search for *Explore: For your daily walk with God*.

And remember, *it's quality, not quantity, that counts*: better to think briefly about a single verse than to skim through pages without absorbing anything, because it's about developing your relationship with the living God. The sign that your daily time with God is real is when you start to love him more and serve him more wholeheartedly.

Tim Thornborough and Carl Laferton
Editors



REVELATION: Be faithful

Many people are confused by the cycles of “sevens” in John’s book: seals, trumpets, thunders. Are they a sequence of events that will take place in history or something else?

These overlapping visions are not intended to be read sequentially but as different camera angles on the same events—the time in which John’s readers lived and in which we live, leading up to the end of time. As we read these different sequences and images, John is saying, *it’s a bit like this; or a bit like that; or it’s something like this...* These visions should engage our imaginations and lead us to confidence in God’s sovereignty rather than confusion and doubt.

Read Revelation 10:1-7

This new vision of the thunders interrupts the time between the sixth (9:13) and seventh trumpets; just as there was a gap between the sixth and seventh seals.

- ❓ *What does the description of the angel in verses 1-2 call to mind from the Bible?*
- ❓ *What happens when John hears the seven thunders (v 4)?*
- ❓ *What do you think the message they spoke may have been? (Hint: Think about the seals and the trumpets in chapters 6 – 9.)*
- ❓ *What are the two promises that are made in 10:6 and 7?*
- ❓ *What is “the mystery of God”, do you think (v 7)?*

John is poised to catalogue the calamities that the thunders will bring—just as he’s done with the seals and trumpets. But the seven thunders are immediately rescinded. It’s not clear why, but it may be because humanity

didn’t respond to the seals and trumpets with repentance (9:20-21). The seven seals affected a quarter of the earth (6:8) while the seven trumpets affected a third of the earth (8:8-12; 9:15). Presumably the seven thunders would have affected a half of the earth. But the escalation of calamities in history will not bring repentance. So the thunders are withdrawn. Instead God reveals his secret weapon... represented by the tiny scroll in the angel’s hand. It’s seemingly so insignificant, and yet at the heart of God’s purposes for the world.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, the mystery is a mystery no more for it’s been revealed in the gospel of Christ (see Ephesians 3:8-11; Colossians 1:27). And the word “announced” in Revelation 10:7 is literally “evangelised”. So the purposes of God in history revealed in the scroll involve the proclamation of the gospel by God’s people. “There will be no more delay” (v 6) means there’s no saving event that needs to happen before the final judgment (we’ve already had the cross, resurrection, ascension and Pentecost). There’s nothing to stop Christ returning today. But “in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet” (v 7)—that is, before the final judgment—the gospel is proclaimed to the nations.

Pray

Ask God to fulfil his purpose of gospel proclamation today, through your church, through missionaries... and through you.

Eating the scroll

John's description of what happens to the scroll would have been familiar to his readers from the Old Testament...

The scroll

Read Ezekiel 2:9 – 3:9 and then Revelation 10:8-11

- ❓ *What is the effect of the scroll on both Ezekiel and John?*
- ❓ *In verse 11 what is John told he must do as a result?*
- ❓ *How do you think this experience relates to our experience of receiving and sharing the gospel message?*
- ❓ *What would John's first readers have understood from the example and life of Ezekiel about the calling to be witnesses?*

Ezekiel proclaimed God's message faithfully to the exiles in Babylon—and images from his book and life are returned to again and again in Revelation. The message of the scroll is bittersweet for it is a message of victory through suffering. All Christians know something of John's experience. The message of Christ is so sweet to us. But this sweetness is matched by pain when family and friends reject the message, leaving a bitter taste in the stomach.

Revelation 10:11 is the key command in these chapters. And it extends beyond John to us. We must proclaim the gospel to the nations, even in the face of hostility. John is reminding us again and again that Christ's salvation and our mission extend across the globe. Just when we might be tempted to retreat in the face of hostility, John is repeatedly expanding our horizons. His message

to Christians is not that we should endure if by that we mean avoiding trouble by keeping our heads down. His message is to proclaim the gospel to nations, to peoples, to kings. Instead of his normal quartet of "nations, tribes, peoples and languages", John substitutes "kings" for "tribes". Yes, we even proclaim the gospel to kings—the holders of power and the source of threat.

Apply

We are to withhold the gospel from no-one.

- ❓ *Who would you be fearful of sharing the gospel with? A Muslim perhaps? Or your boss at work?*

Our job now

Chapters 10 – 11 take place in a pause between the sixth and seventh trumpets. The seventh event in each of John's sequences describes the return of Christ and the final judgment. God has hit the pause button on his judgment. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." The pause between the sixth and seventh trumpet—for as long as it lasts, and it will not last for ever—creates space for the mission of the church.



The measuring rod

Now John is given a measuring rod and is introduced to two witnesses who meet a grim end...

Measure the temple

Read Revelation 11:1-3

- ❓ *What do you think measuring the temple means?*
- ❓ *Why is the outer court left out?*
- ❓ *Who are the two witnesses, and what do the details in verse 3 represent?*

The temple that John is to measure is not a literal temple; it is a description of the church as it is now on earth. The measuring of the temple is a sign that, whatever happens in history, ultimately, the church is the safe place to be.

In the original temple the outer court was for the Gentiles: a promise of their inclusion. But now, in Christ, Jew and Gentile together are the temple (see Ephesians 2:11-22). So we don't need the outer court to symbolise inclusion, for that inclusion is a reality. Instead the outer court symbolises the threat posed by the unbelieving nations as they trample on God's people.

But the suffering of God's people will not last for ever. Forty-two months is a reference back to Daniel 7:25 ("a time, times and half a time" = a year, two years and half a year = "42 months" = "1,260 days"). John is reiterating the message of Daniel 7: whatever people may do to us, we are kept safe in history for eternity. But we are not passive in the face of hostility...

The witnesses

Read Revelation 11:4-10

- ❓ *What power have the two witnesses (also referred to as olive trees and lampstands) been given by God?*
- ❓ *What is brought to mind by the images in verse 6?*
- ❓ *What happens to them eventually?*
- ❓ *What is the reaction of the people to their deaths (v 9-10)?*

The two witnesses of verse 3 are God's people: his royal priesthood. Mission is both a priestly activity (representing God to the world) and a royal activity (extending Christ's reign by calling on people to submit to his authority). And through our words, we bring the fire of divine judgment on those who reject our message (see 2 Corinthians 2:15-16). To our priestly and kingly roles, we can add a prophetic role, since the two witnesses are also an allusion to the two greatest figures of the Old Testament: Moses and Elijah. Today, we are engaged in powerful word-ministry. For we bring either eternal life or eternal death as we proclaim the gospel. But we should not expect people to like us for it.

Pray

Pray that all who proclaim the good news of Jesus would understand the privilege and the cost of their calling—you too.

Resurrection power

We left the two witnesses yesterday dead and despised: rotting in the street, as people mocked them and behaved as if it was Christmas. Now the tide turns...

The breath of life

Read Revelation 11:11-12

-  *What happens next?*
-  *What is the reaction of the bystanders?*
-  *Where do the witnesses end up?*

The witnesses represent any and all individual Christians: churches (lampstands), or Christian leaders. We are protected from harm (v 5), so that we may proclaim the gospel, which is hated by those who hear it and opposed by the devil (the beast, v 7). The great city here is clearly Jerusalem, “where their Lord was crucified” (v 8). But ultimately it represents all cities anywhere where there are faithful Christians witnessing to the gospel of Christ and being opposed by Satan. In other words, *your town*.

The resurrection of the witnesses in verses 11-12 should not be understood as literal. It presents the truth of history as a whole: the church is persecuted, Christians are martyred, and at times the cause of Christ seems defeated. But the church survives and comes back with renewed strength, and the cause of Christ continues. What is God’s “secret weapon” in the face of the hostile powers of this world? It is the faithful people of God sustained by the powerful Spirit of God. Again and again throughout history, regimes have risen and it’s looked as if they would wipe out the church. But those regimes have gone and the church has come through persecution stronger. It

has been victorious through suffering. Life has come through death.

Fear and glory

Read Revelation 11:13

-  *What happens to the city, and what is the ultimate response?*

The calamities of the seven seals and seven trumpets do not bring repentance (Revelation 9:20-21). Instead, the nations fear God and give him glory in response to the faithful witness of God’s people—especially their faithful witness “even to the point of death” (2:10). Or perhaps sometimes it’s the suffering witness of God’s people combined with the calamities of history that brings people to repentance. The turmoil of history, represented by the seven seals and trumpets, on its own leads only to judgment. But the turmoil of history combined with Christian witness leads some to repentance.

Pray

Victory comes through suffering. Ask the Lord to imprint this truth in the minds of his people, so we will be prepared.

Turmoil can lead to repentance. Pray that those who are afflicted by suffering would also hear the gospel and see the faithfulness of Christian witnesses—and come to give glory to the God of heaven.



Victory song

After the interlude, at last, the seventh trumpet is blown, and the sounds of fear and hatred are replaced by a song of victory.

Everlasting victory

Read Revelation 11:14-19

- ❓ *What happens when the trumpet sounds?*
- ❓ *What is the tone or mood of what follows?*
- ❓ *What do the images of verse 19 bring to mind?*
- ❓ *Read over the victory song: what parts of it particularly appeal to you? Why?*

When the seventh trumpet sounds, the sequence of seven comes to an end and with it the course of history. In the end God is victorious. He will reign for ever (v 16-17). John draws attention to the ark in the temple (v 19). The ark contained the tablets of the covenant. So here John reminds us of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises: the nations will be judged and God's people will be rewarded (v 18). Despite all the calamities that befall the church in history, we are on the winning side.

But it's not a victory won through power or through the sword. It's not won through drone strikes nor by acts of terrorism. It's won by God's people witnessing to the gospel, even if that means weakness and death. Our model is Jesus, who in 1:5 is called "the faithful witness". He is the archetypal faithful witness even when it means death. This empire—"the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (11:15)—is won by the Lamb who was slain (5:6).

John's readers must have wondered if Christ was truly sovereign. They knew the stories of Nero's cruel persecutions in AD 64. They had witnessed the Parthian invasion, civil war in AD 69 ("the year of the four emperors"), the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and the famines of AD 92. They knew the daily tension of a thousand choices to speak or keep quiet, to take a stand or participate in paganism. Revelation 6 – 11 shows that Christ rules over these sufferings. More than that, our sufferings are part of his plan to bring history under his rule.

Life through death

In these chapters God's people die and live. Because we're united to Christ, our lives are shaped by his death and resurrection. His death and resurrection are not just the means of our salvation; they're also the pattern for our lives. We die to self and live to God. Whenever you see people receiving spiritual life or a lively, living church, you can be sure that behind the scenes, often unnoticed, someone is working hard, denying themselves, making sacrifices.

▼ Apply

- ❓ *Have you seen victory through suffering in your own experience?*
- ❓ *In what ways are you dying to yourself to bring life to others?*

Anxiety attack

This great song needs no introduction, except to say it's wonderful! As you read it try to work out why it has inspired and helped so many Christians down the years

Read Psalm 139

- ❓ *What moves you particularly about this psalm? What verse would you memorise from it and pass on to others today?*

Verses 19-22 are the clue to what's going on here. David is under attack from people who hate God and hate him. Scared and vulnerable, he stops to remember just how secure he is in God's hands.

God knows me

Re-read Psalm 139:1-6

- ❓ *How well does God know David (and therefore each of us)?*
❓ *What specifically does David recognise that God knows (v 4-6)?*

Such knowledge (v 5) might be terrifying to us, leading to paranoia, but verse 6 shows that David doesn't feel trapped by his lack of privacy from God.

God is everywhere

Re-read Psalm 139:7-10

David isn't trying to *escape* from God. Rather, he's just saying, *It's impossible to escape from God—even if I wanted to.*

TIME OUT

But there *are* times when we might want to run away from God... Sometimes, it's because we're harbouring some secret

sin that we don't want to have exposed to the Lord's disapproving (but loving) stare. Sometimes, we're just afraid of intimacy. But at other times, church, life, relationships, family even, all just get too much for us. We feel the pressures and demands, and react against being squeezed into a life that we didn't choose by work, family, friends and church. We lose our nerve and toy with the idea of running away from it all...

It may be good, if you can, to have a holiday from all the pressures, but it's just plain silly to think we can run away from God. And often, when we're under pressure, we lose the vital perspective that the God who knows us, also loves us with a deep, caring and gentle passion.

Apply

God knows all there is to know about you—even things you are completely unaware of. But he still has a firm hold on us to lead and protect us... So we can live as his enemy, trying to escape him (stupidity). Or we can trust him in his knowledge and power (security).

Pray

Read the whole psalm through again as a prayer, as though you'd written it yourself...



Dragon versus woman

In the first eleven chapters of Revelation, the key question is “What do you see?” In chapters 12 – 14, the question changes to “Who do you worship?”

Revelation 12 retells the whole of human history as a drama involving three characters: a woman, a child and a dragon.

Read Revelation 12:1-9

- ❓ *Who might the woman be (v 1-2)? (Hint: There may be more than one answer!)*
- ❓ *Who is the child? (Hint: There is only one answer!)*
- ❓ *Who is the dragon (v 3)? And what is the significance of how he is described?*

The woman could be Mary since she gives birth to Jesus. But she's more likely to be the people of God as a whole. Isaiah portrays Israel as a woman in childbirth, waiting to bring forth the Messiah (Isaiah 26:17; 66:6), and the woman in Revelation spans the whole history of redemption. Revelation 12:17 refers to Christians as “the rest of her offspring”—the product of the mission of the church. The child is Jesus. Verse 5 quotes Psalm 2:9, where God's Messiah receives an iron sceptre to rule the nations. The dragon (Satan) is portrayed as terrifyingly dangerous: strong, clever, with enormous power. The drama unfolds in three acts.

Act One: Jesus comes

Read Revelation 12:4-6

- ❓ *What does the dragon try to do?*
- ❓ *How is he thwarted?*
- ❓ *What incidents in the life of Christ does this story remind you of?*

Verses 1-6 refer to the first coming of Jesus seen as a single event, encompassing his birth, the cross (Satan's attempt to devour the child) and his ascension (the child being snatched up to heaven). Throughout history Satan has opposed God's people, and sought to destroy them.

Act Two: Satan goes

Read Revelation 12:7-9

- ❓ *When does the angelic war take place?*
- ❓ *What is the result?*
- ❓ *What do you think this refers to?*

Job 1 suggests that before the coming of Jesus, Satan had access to heaven, and what he did in heaven was accuse God's people. But he and his angels have now “lost their place in heaven”—that is, Satan can no longer accuse us because God's people are now righteous through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We shouldn't focus on Satan's *location*, for the spatial imagery of being in heaven is used in Revelation 12 metaphorically to describe Satan's power to accuse.

But where does this leave us now?

Pray

Praise God that the power of Satan has been crushed by the cross of Christ.

Thank God that, in Christ, we have a righteousness that can never be challenged.

We are here

Jesus has come, and Satan has been defeated through the cross and resurrection; but what is happening now?

The church triumphant

Read Revelation 12:10-11

- ❓ *Who is now in charge, according to the voice from heaven (v 10)?*
- ❓ *What can Satan no longer do (v 10)?*
- ❓ *How was and is Satan defeated (v 11)?*
- ❓ *What does this require of Christians?*

The reason Satan can no longer legitimately accuse us is because God's people are now righteous through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Satan is defeated through the cross. The verdict has been given in the court of heaven. The prosecution case against Christians is rejected and the prosecution counsel is silenced. Only the defence counsel remains—Jesus our advocate (Romans 8:34). The defendant is declared not guilty. There is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). The archangel Michael is simply the bailiff carrying out the eviction order that was secured at the cross. If Satan had been victorious, then the saints would have been cast out of heaven because his accusations against us would have been vindicated. But Christ is victorious, so it's Satan who is cast out and we are vindicated in Christ. Satan loses his "place" (Revelation 12:8) because we have gained a place.

But there is another piece to this battle.

The church militant

Read Revelation 12:11-12

- ❓ *What should our response be to all this?*
- ❓ *What is Satan doing now?*

Verse 12 tells us that Satan has been thrown down to earth in a great rage. He is doomed but still dangerous, like a defeated army that is in full retreat and yet doing its best to inflict whatever damage it can on the victors. And the focus is on "the word of ... testimony" that is given by God's people. It is the testimony—the gospel—that draws others into Christ's forgiveness. And it is the faithful bearing of that testimony through persecution and suffering that brings the saints, like their Saviour, to heaven at last.

This is why it's so tough to live as a Christian. We are struggling against a defeated but still dangerous dragon.

Apply

- ❓ *How true to your own experience is this picture of the current spiritual reality?*
- ❓ *In what ways do you experience the accusations and hostility of Satan in the course of everyday life?*
- ❓ *How do the death and ascension of Jesus enable us to respond to Satan's attacks?*



Church warfare

We often like to think of our weekly church gathering as a place of peace and quiet, or of joyful family fellowship, or as a place of learning.

But should also be seen as something else: a bloody battlefield?

Act Three: Warfare!

Read Revelation 12:13-17

- ❓ *What stories from the Old Testament does this narrative bring to mind?*
- ❓ *Who is the woman that the dragon pursues?*
- ❓ *How would this story help and encourage Christians who are suffering persecution?*

The woman flees to the wilderness (v 14), just as Elijah did from Jezebel and Jesus fled to Egypt from Herod. But the imagery of Act Three is primarily drawn from the exodus. The church is experiencing a second exodus. In Exodus 19:4, at Mount Sinai, God says of Israel, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself”. Now again God is rescuing his people on eagles’ wings. The flood is a common image in the Old Testament for overwhelming evil (Psalm 18:4; Isaiah 43:2). Now God keeps his people for a symbolic 42 months before they inherit the promised new creation (Revelation 12:14).

God’s people are a wilderness people, not at home in a hostile world. But in the wilderness we are nourished and kept by God, just as Israel was nourished by manna and protected by the pillars of cloud and fire.

▼ Apply

John portrays the struggle of the church as a great cosmic battle, spanning heaven and earth. This is an epic *Lord-of-the-Rings* or *Narnia*-type narrative. He locates the struggle of his readers in the biggest possible context. Their day-to-day struggle to live without compromise is part of a battle that touches heaven itself. In verse 1 the church is viewed from the perspective of heaven, and she is glorious and reigning over the universe: “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head”. Despite all that we may suffer, this is a description of you *now*.

The chapter reminds us that Satan is both a real *and* a defeated foe. The one command in the chapter is in verse 12: *Rejoice!* Both truths should motivate us. There is no place for apathy, and there is no need for despair.

▲ Pray

If Satan is accusing you, rejoice that Christ’s blood is all you need.

If you are facing Satan’s hostility, ask the Lord for the strength to love him and the gospel more than your life.

And pray for your brothers and sisters in parts of the world where being a faithful witness can lead to physical harm and death.



The power of the beast

In Revelation 13 we see the current manifestation of Satan's influence, as two beasts appear who dominate the world and persecute God's people.

Once again, we need to understand that John is not describing a *sequence* of events, but piling up pictures on top of each other to engage our imaginations and locate our current experiences in the cosmic drama. *It's a bit like this; or it's a bit like that...*

Read Revelation 13:1-4

- ❓ *What do you think the first beast represents, from its description?*
- ❓ *How does the beast exercise its power?*
- ❓ *How does the world respond to the beast (v 4)?*

The first beast represents the political and military power of empire. In John's time, this was the arrival of Roman armies across the Mediterranean to conquer Asia Minor. Its ten horns, seven heads and ten crowns are a reworking of the images in Daniel 7, in which Daniel sees successive empires. Here is the latest expression of imperial power. It looks like various fierce carnivores—animals used by Rome to signify its power.

Apply

Worship doesn't always look religious. The people admire the strength and achievements of the beast, in the same way that people today might take great pride in our military, or in the achievements of science, or in our sporting prowess. We feel strong and successful because our team or nation is. We place ultimate value (worship) where it does not belong.

Beast talk

Read Revelation 13:5-10

- ❓ *What do we learn about the character and motivation of the beast?*
- ❓ *What is encouraging about verse 7?*
- ❓ *How are we meant to understand verses 9-10?*

Although these verses were clearly written about the Roman empire at the time, the beast could be *any* empire throughout history. Not all power is bad and not all empires are evil. But this empire utters “blasphemies” (v 5-6). It takes the place of God, redefines morality and demands ultimate allegiance (v 8). Inevitably that brings it into conflict with God's people, for we have a competing allegiance. So it wages war against the church (v 7). The results are inevitable: Christians will be imprisoned and martyred (v 9-10). It's not hard to find parallels of this today: North Korea is one. In the West we don't live under an idolatrous empire. But there are idolatrous elements to our society. Our governments are redefining morality in areas like euthanasia, abortion, gender and sexuality. We too live under the influence of the beast.

Apply

The beast has no power of its own, but only what is given to it (v 7). We can be confident that whatever is happening, it is God who is ultimately in control.



The second beast

We may not live under an oppressive domineering government that demands our absolute obedience. Perhaps it is the second beast we should be more fearful of...

Innocent?

Read Revelation 13:11-17

- ❓ *What is confusing about the description in verse 11?*
- ❓ *How does the second beast secure its following (v 12-14)?*
- ❓ *Who does it serve, and what is its ultimate aim?*

The second beast looks like a lamb—innocent and harmless in a twisted parody of Jesus. But it speaks the words of the dragon, Satan. The second beast is the propagandist. It's not providing a reasoned case for empire. It produces signs and images to seduce, threaten, impress and overwhelm the peoples of the earth (v 13-15).

The Roman Empire exercised control not only through military power but also through access to its prosperity. "Soft power", we would call it today, or "winning hearts and minds". The point is not to look for literal marks today (like barcodes). The point is that the beast demands our allegiance. It uses both carrot and stick: acquiesce and you can share in the bounty; resist and you're excluded. This isn't just state power; it can also be peer pressure.

▼ Apply

John invites us to question the propaganda of the second beast and see through its images. All its wonders are a parody of God. It

makes fire come down from heaven (v 13), as Elijah did (1 Kings 18). It performs signs and wonders (Revelation 13:14), just as Jesus and the apostles did. It exalts the beast who was wounded and yet lives, just as Christians exalt the Lamb who was slain but rose again. The triumvirate of the dragon and the two beasts form a parody of the Trinity. Through a thousand adverts and glossy magazines, the beast says, *All this could be yours if you bow before me.* John wants us to see the work of the second beast for what it is. He wants us to reject its seductions and worship Christ instead.

- ❓ *What aspects of modern life would you find hardest to lose?*
- ❓ *Do you recognise the subtle pressure this places on us to conform?*

Numbered

Read Revelation 13:18

- ❓ *What do you think this number means?*

There are many theories: one is that 666 is the sum of Nero's name in a Hebrew system in which letters were assigned numeric values. If so, John is saying the wise person realises Nero and his successors are the latest manifestation of satanic power. Alternatively, it may represent one less than the perfection represented by 777. If so, John is saying that the wise person recognises imperial power is not good, nor the final word in history.

The numbered saints

After the horrific visions of the last two chapters, John now looks and sees an alternative vision.

Sealed

Read Revelation 14:1-5

- ❓ *What is the significance of the mark (compare 13:16-17)?*
- ❓ *What is the significance of the number of people?*
- ❓ *Make a list of the qualities that lead to inclusion in this musical multitude.*
- ❓ *What do you think verse 4 means?*

John sees Jesus, the Lamb, surrounded by 144,000, representing all God's true people. The second beast put a mark on people giving them access to the market and the glories of Rome. The 144,000 have the marks of the Lamb and the Father, indicating their inclusion in the glories of his kingdom.

Throughout Revelation, immorality is a picture of spiritual adultery. So, again, these are not literal sexual virgins—but those who have kept themselves free of the seductions of empire. And what do they do? They sing (Revelation 14:2-3). While the world worships the beast, they worship the Lamb.

TIME OUT

Jehovah's Witnesses claim that this number is a real, literal number, and that the 144,000 are a special subset of believers.

- ❓ *How might you challenge this claim in a doorstep conversation in a way that leads towards the gospel?*

Saints

Read Revelation 14:1-5 again

- ❓ *Look again at the qualities that mark those who have been sealed. How can these be true for us?*
- ❓ *How does that make you feel?*

Who can claim that they are undefiled, follow the Lamb wherever he goes, have never lied, and are blameless? If you belong to Jesus—you can!

We have received the righteousness of Christ, and the Father accepts us as having all the love, faithfulness and purity of his Son, Jesus. The challenge for us is to live out that new, true identity, rather than slip back into our old ways of thinking and living. In that direction there is only death and judgment. With Christ there is joy and life. But victory only comes through suffering.

Apply

- ❓ *Which of these qualities do you most struggle to live up to in your daily life?*
- ❓ *In what area do you think our culture most puts pressure on us to conform?*

Pray that you, your church, and God's people throughout the world would live with the clarity this vision presents; and strive to live joyfully and truthfully as we worship Jesus.