

Revelation: The Church Triumphant Through Christ the Lamb of God

Based upon Jim McGuigan's work on the book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation: Numbers and Their Message

Lesson Eight

In this lesson, we will learn that ...

- In Revelation, numbers have symbolic meaning.
 - Numbers are used to give messages or to help describe the character of a thing.
 - Numbers take on significance based on a culture's background and experience.
 - We use numbers in a symbolic manner today.
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Numbers and the book of Revelation

In Revelation numbers have meanings! In general, throughout the Bible when you read of a man having five sons or that someone traveled nine days you can be sure the man had five sons and the traveler traveled nine days. In the book of Revelation (and other apocalyptic material) you occasionally come across numbers that have no special significance *but that's unusual*. Usually the numbers are giving us a message. I'll illustrate this as we go along.

Some young man in ancient Pompeii scribbled this on a wall: "I love a girl whose number is 545." That wasn't her phone number or address. In ancient languages the letters of the alphabet were also numbers and (presumably) the young man in Pompeii was scribbling her initials. The number "10" in gymnastics has come to represent a flawless performance. And the number thirteen (by superstition) stands for that which is unlucky. The ancients did similar things with their numbers depending on their background and experience. The Hebrews certainly did.

What follows is a brief glance at some of the more important numbers used in biblical texts—numbers that carried messages in them. Sometimes it's possible to make sense of how the numbers came to suggest the "message" and at other times we only know they have that significance but we don't know how they came to get it.

The number seven

The number seven speaks of completeness, perfection and fullness. It relates to that which lacks nothing, it's all there. Seven describes the totality of a thing and it's probably the most prominent number in Revelation. When John wants us to know that Christ dwells in the entire church he has him walking amidst "seven" churches (1:12,13,20 and 2:1). Christ's fullness of power is described in terms of "seven horns" (5:6 horn is another symbol—of strength and authority) and when he is said to have the fullness of the Spirit and God's gifts, without limit, we're told he has "the seven spirits of God" (5:6, compare Isaiah 11:1-3). His complete wisdom and vision is described by saying he has seven eyes (5:6). Seven seals perfectly conceal the book and ripping off seven seals is a full revealing of its contents. Seven trumpets are a full warning (8:2) and seven outpoured bowls are the full wrath of God (15:1, 16:1). When Christ calls his people to forgive "seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22) he calls for forgiveness without limit.

The power and authority of the beast is described in terms of seven heads. Not only does that speak of seven actual kings and hills (17:9,10) it says that as a beast-like kingdom he is full of power. There's no suggestion that he has power equal to Christ only that within his own sphere he is full of power.

It isn't difficult to see how "seven" could come to stand for completeness. It was after six days of work that God rested on the seventh because his creative work was completed. The seventh day completes a week. Seven and its multiples came to stand for a condition, a state of affairs, or a situation that speaks "that's all!"

The number three and a half (with 42 and 1,260)

Seven symbolizes Christ's power and authority and *when contrasted with Christ's* the beast's power is three and a half. Three and a half is a broken seven. Three and a half is said to be a time, (two) times and half a time

(12:6,14). The equivalent phrase is 1,260 days (12:6) or forty-two months (11:2 and 13:5). The Jews worked on a thirty-day month and added an inter-calary month to bring their years up to a solar year.

Twelve hundred sixty days is forty-two months and that is three and a half years or time, times and half a time. We know these to be interchangeable for several reasons. In 12:6 we're told the Woman flees to the wilderness for 1,260 days and in 12:14 we're told she's there for time, times and half a time. The beast is given authority for forty-two months, which is $42 \times 30 = 1,260$. The armies of the beast tread down the temple for forty-two months though they are unable to take the citadel and during that period the two Witnesses preach for 1,260 days (11:3). When the Witnesses are slain they aren't dead for a full week (a seven) but for three and a half days and then they live again (11:9).

If someone asked you to describe Christ's power and authority with a number, in Revelation terms you would say it was a seven. When you describe the beast's power and authority as limited and not complete you'd describe it with the number three and a half. *Three and a half speaks of limitation!* The Woman is really troubled but it's only for 1,260 days (three and a half years). The Witnesses wear *sackcloth* (a symbol of mourning and suffering) while they preach but it's only for 1,260 days or forty-two months or three and a half years (11:3,9,11). Three and half speaks of limitation! It speaks of a state of affairs where the people of God are troubled but they are triumphant, they suffer but are supported, they are down but they are never out.

In 1 Kings 17 we have the story of the drought that lasted for three and a half years (see James 5:17 and Luke 4:25). During that time God preserved his prophet and fed him in the wilderness via ravens, a poor widow and God's miraculous provision. So you have both the trial and the provision. This story no doubt contributed to the use of three and a half years in the way we see it here. (It's the kind of thing that happened to the number forty.) *Be sure to look again at Lesson 3 and refresh your mind about the Woman and the Witnesses.*

The number six

The number six stands for *Man*. The number seven functions as perfection and six falls short of that (see Romans 3:23). Man was created on the sixth day (Genesis 1:26,31). In Revelation 13:18 John gives the beast's number as "six, six, six". The whole world is afraid of the beast and worships him. He claims godhood and professes to be unstoppable, lord of the eternal city. But the people of God are assured that there's nothing to be afraid of and there's certainly nothing to be worshiped! The beast is human and evil. In Daniel 7:17 it is one of four that rises "from the earth" in contrast to the Son of Man who rides on the clouds of heaven and goes to the Ancient of Days who gives him his authority (7:13-14). Those kingdoms are bestial and he is human. They are of the earth and his kingdom is the kingdom of heaven. They are anti-God and he is the Servant of the one true God.

When John describes the beast's power he says it's three and a half and when he describes the beast's nature and character he says he is six-six-six. The tripled six may well be because Rome is present in a threefold way—sea beast, earth beast and prostitute (city).

The number of the beast, he tells us (13:18) is "man's number." He doesn't mean *a* man, as in a specific person. There is no indefinite article in Greek and only the context determines whether we should supply one or not. Here six, six, six is not the number of *a* man, it is the number of *Man*. You can see this illustrated in Galatians 3:15 where "even if it is a man's covenant" doesn't mean a particular person—it means, "even if it is a covenant that *humans* make" (he's comparing it with a covenant God has made). And take a look at Revelation 21:17.

The number twelve

If you have any familiarity with Old Testament history, you may find it not too hard to see how the number twelve in Hebrew religious thought was the symbol for organized religion in the world. The twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve jewels on the high priest's breastplate, the twelve cakes of shewbread, the twelve spies, the list goes on. Brought forward to New Testament times we have the twelve apostles. Thus, we have the throne scene in Revelation chapters four and five with the 24 thrones and the 24 elders (multiples of twelve). And we have another multiple of twelve, the number 144,000 (Revelation 14:1), representing the whole people of God as an organized singularity.

The number one-thousand

Like seven there is the notion of fullness and completeness in the number 1,000 but it appears that the number 1,000 deals with that concept on a larger scale. Psalm 50:10 has God claiming that the cattle on a thousand hills are his. What about the cattle on hill 1,001? They're his, too, but he doesn't need to go around saying, "And that's mine, and that, too, and those over there." Claiming to own the cattle on a thousand hills is a claim to all

of them. He claims to be faithful to a thousand generations (Exodus 20:5 and Deuteronomy 7:9 and elsewhere). What about poor generation 1,001? He's faithful to them too because his faithfulness knows no limit. One thousand may well mean one thousand in many texts but the context usually makes that clear since it will occur in historical books rather than poetic or apocalyptic. When it's carrying a message it speaks of what is unreserved and complete, without limit. Hitler used to say he would establish a kingdom that would last a thousand years. Presumably it added nothing to go higher than that.

When we read in Revelation 20:1-3 of the Devil's defeat as lasting one thousand years we're not being given chronology or a date on a calendar. A thousand generations was not offering a cut-off date and a thousand years in Revelation 20 isn't either. Remember Revelation tells its message in symbols and signs. When it describes the beast's limited authority it calls it a three and a half-year authority. When it describes the Devil's defeat or the victory of the saints it calls them "a thousand year defeat" or a "thousand year reign" (20:4-6).

The death of the Witnesses is robbed of its power by being called a "three and a half-day" death (11:9-12) but the death of the beast's allies is hammered home by being seen as a "thousand year death" (20:4-6). This has nothing to do with dates on a calendar!

Here's the question: when the smoke has cleared from the battle in chapter 19 has the Devil been defeated in his use of Rome? Yes! Or has he just lost a skirmish in that battle? No skirmish! In *that* phase of his defiance of God—using Rome as his tool—he was not only staggered he was thoroughly beaten! How does John say those words? He paints a picture of chains, a hole in the earth and a thousand-year incarceration.

When the smoke from the battle in chapter 19 has cleared have the people of God triumphed over the beasts and the Dragon that used them? Yes! Or was it just that they had gained an edge and the brawl wasn't done? They didn't gain "an edge". They triumphed unreservedly! And how does John say the words I just said? He paints a picture of saints sitting enthroned with Christ for 1,000 years.

As far as his use of Rome is concerned Satan was decisively and utterly defeated. But might there be other enemies through whom he would attack God by attacking His people? No doubt but Satan's future failure and utter loss is assured. How is that said? First the image of 1,000 years is allowed to run its course so that the truth it has to tell is not obscured and then another image is presented. A "little season" (as distinct from 1,000 years), Satan gathers an army of staggering proportions, attacks the people of God, God's judgment falls and the lake of fire receives the Devil and all his allies (20:7-15).

Other numbers in the book of Revelation

Man saw a single object and came to associate with the number "1" the idea of unity or independent existence. It stood for that which was unique and alone. This number is not used figuratively very often in the book of Revelation.

When man went out to hunt the wild animal or fight against a foe he found strength and courage in companionship. Two were far stronger and much more effective than one. Thus the number "2" came to stand for strength, for confirmation, for redoubled courage and energy. In the book of Revelation the truth is confirmed by two witnesses who are slain and rise again. Two beasts present a formidable foe.

The number three occurs hundreds of times in scripture. This has helped "3" to come to carry the thought of divine perfection. In the creation there was God, the Spirit of God, and the Word of God (Genesis 1:3; John 1:1). Noah had three sons. The three OT patriarchs are thought of as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The three persons of the Godhead were present when one of them was baptized (Matthew 3:13-17). The classic and most important use of the number to believers is the resurrection of our Lord on the third day.

To man the world was a flat surface with four boundaries and four corners. There were four winds coming from four directions. In the town in which he lived he was surrounded by a wall with four sides. Thus when he thought of the world he thought of four. In Revelation we see four living creatures and four horsemen. The world in which men lived and worked and died was conveniently symbolized by "4".

Next man turned to study himself. Perhaps our decimal system arose from the intensive study by a man of his own fingers and toes. A perfect man was one who had all his members intact. So the number "5" doubled to "10" could stand for human completeness. In Revelation there are ten horns, ten kings, and ten diadems. So "10" could also indicate fullness of power or rule. 1000 (10x10x10) refers to ultimate completeness - completeness raised to the nth degree.

Exercises for Lesson Eight

Complete the following statements.

1. Here six, six, six is **not the number of a man, it is the number of Man.** _____
2. Thus, we have the throne scene **in Revelation chapters four and five with the 24 thrones and the 24 elders (multiples of twelve).** _____
3. Christ's fullness of power is described **in terms of "seven horns" (5:6 horn is another symbol - of strength and authority) and when he is said to have the fullness of the Spirit and God's gifts, without limit, we're told he has "the seven spirits of God" (5:6, compare Isaiah 11:1-3).**
4. So the number "5" **doubled to "10" could stand for human completeness.** _____
5. Seven and its multiples **came to stand for a condition, a state of affairs, or a situation that speaks "that's all!"** _____
6. The world in which men **lived and worked and died was conveniently symbolized by "4".** _____
7. He paints a picture of saints **sitting enthroned with Christ for 1,000 years.** _____
8. When it describes the Devil's defeat **or the victory of the saints it calls them "a thousand year defeat" or a "thousand year reign" (20:4-6).** _____
9. When you describe the beast's power and authority **as limited and not complete you'd describe it with the number three and a half.** _____
10. Twelve hundred sixty days is **forty-two months and that is three and a half years or time, times and half a time.** _____

Give the number that symbolizes these.

1. This number could be used figuratively for fullness of power or rule. 10
2. The number of Man. 6
3. The number of perfection and completeness. 7
4. Another number for completeness or totality, but on a larger scale. 1000
5. The number of limited and incomplete power. 3 1/2
6. The number for organized religion. 12
7. The number for the world in which men lived. 4

True or False?

1. God owns only the cattle on a 1000 hills. F
2. The number "3" occurs just a few times in the Old Testament. F
3. John pictures the Devil's utter defeat by showing him in chains for a thousand years. T
4. In ancient times the letters of the alphabet were used also as numbers. T
5. Christ orders his people to forgive one another 490 times. T/F
6. Seven stands for completeness, perfection, or totality. T
7. In the Bible, numbers always have a special meaning. F
8. "Horns" in the Bible were often used as symbols of strength and power. T
9. Man was created on the fourth day. F
10. The number "1" has come to mean selfish, a loner, someone who doesn't want anyone's help. F

Check off each of the following references after you have read it.

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| Time of persecution for 3 1/2 years | The Two Witnesses dead for 3 1/2 days | Our spiritual death, burial, resurrection (3) |
| <u> </u> Daniel 7:25-27 | <u> </u> Revelation 11:1-11 | <u> </u> Romans 6:3-5 |
| 1000 symbolic for "forever" | | Satan defeated and Saints reign for 1000 years |
| <u> </u> Deuteronomy 7:9 with Psalm 105:8 | <u> </u> Revelation 20:1-6 | |
| Importance of 2/3 witnesses; 7 as symbolic | God's people as 144,000 | Elijah's 3 1/2 year drought |
| <u> </u> Matthew 18:15-22 | <u> </u> Revelation 14:1 | <u> </u> James 5:17 |