HISTORY REPEATED

In the fifteenth century the Piedmont valleys, high in the Alps of northern Italy, were home to the Waldenses, a people determined to stay faithful to their understanding of the Bible. As the result of their steadfast loyalty to Christ, they were fiercely persecuted. In A.D. 1488 the Waldenses in the Valley of Loyse were brutally murdered by the Roman Church for their faith.

Another wave of persecution against the Waldenses came in the seventeenth century, when the duke of Savoy sent an army of 8,000 into their territory and demanded that the local populace quarter his troops in their homes. The people did as he requested, but the command was a strategy to give the soldiers easy access to their victims. On April 24, 1655, at 4:00 a.m., a signal was given for the massacre to begin. This time the death toll was more than 4,000.

History, unfortunately, is often repeated. The mark of the beast prophecy is about the final link in an evil chain of religious persecution that goes back through the ages. Like the persecutions of the past, it is designed to force everyone to conform to a certain set of beliefs and system of worship. As always, however, God will have a people group who refuse to submit.
Write out Revelation 14:9–11 from the translation of your choice. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map it.
EVIL RISING AND TRUTH FALLING

As we have already studied, the beast powers of Revelation 13 and 14 represent a worldwide system of false worship. But there’s more.

The beast would continue for a specific duration of time. In symbolic time prophecies, a prophetic day equals a literal year, an idea that is supported by Numbers 14:34: “for every day a year” (RSV). Again, God says, “I have appointed thee each day for a year” (Ezek. 4:6, KJV). This principle has repeatedly proven itself accurate in interpreting biblical time prophecies, such as with the 70 weeks of Daniel 9:24–27. Calculating the time period of 42 months mentioned in Revelation 13:5, with 30 days in a month, we come up with 1,260 prophetic days, or literal years. The ancient calendars regularly had 360 days per year.

In the fourth century the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity throughout the empire. When he moved his capital in A.D. 330 to Byzantium to unite the eastern and western parts of his empire, it left a political vacuum in Rome. The pope then filled this void, becoming not only a powerful religious leader but also a political force to be reckoned with. In A.D. 538 Justinian, the Roman emperor, officially granted the Roman bishop the role of the defender of the faith. The medieval church exercised great influence from A.D. 538 to A.D. 1798, including during the terrible persecution mentioned in the introduction to this lesson. Napoleon’s general Berthier took the pope captive in A.D. 1798, in exact fulfillment of the prophecy—exactly 1,260 years after the pope came to power in A.D. 538.

Berthier and his army captured Pope Pius VI and unceremoniously removed him from the papal throne. The blow to the Papacy was serious, but, according to Revelation 13:12, the deadly wound would be healed and the world would hear more from this power.

The apostle Paul warned the Christian community of a “falling away” from the truth of God’s Word. He was concerned about the seeds of apostasy already present in the New Testament church, which would flourish in the coming centuries before the second coming of Christ. A counterfeit gospel would come into the church, distorting the Word of God.

Satan is the one behind this apostasy. He is the true “man of sin” who desires to exalt “himself above all that is called God” and sit in the “temple of God” as if he himself is God (2 Thess. 2:3, 4). The “great deceiver” works through human agencies to accomplish his purposes. The identifying characteristics in Daniel and Revelation reveal that the little horn of Daniel 7, the sea beast of Revelation 13, and the “lawless one” of 2 Thessalonians 2 represent the same entity.

*The SDA Bible Commentary* states it this way: “A comparison with Daniel’s prophecy of the blasphemous power that succeeds that of pagan Rome . . . and with John’s word picture of the leopardslike beast . . . reveals many similarities between the three descriptions [the little horn, the beast power, and the lawless one]. This leads us to the conclusion that Daniel, Paul, and John are speaking of the same power, . . . the papacy” (vol. 7, p. 271).

It is extremely important to remember that these biblical prophesies are describing a system of religion that has compromised God’s Word, substituted human traditions for the gospel, and drifted away from biblical truth. They are given by a God of incredible love to prepare a people for the coming of Christ as well as to rebuke the apostate religious organizations that have departed from God’s Word. However, it is important to note that though He rebukes the corrupt systems of religion, He does not necessarily rebuke the people in them (see Rev. 18:4). The three angels’ messages expose a system that has deceived millions. Though deceived, these people are much loved by Christ. We must treat them accordingly.
SATAN’S FINAL STRATEGY

Surveys reveal a deep lack of trust in institutions and governments. Millions wonder where—or if—we can find someone who is morally fit to lead the world. Revelation’s prophecies identify the beast power as the one who, under the auspices of a religiopolitical union, will be perceived as fit to fill this role.

There are three significant points John makes in Revelation 17:12–14: First, the political powers have “one mind” and “give their power and authority” to the beast. Second, this conglomerate alliance of error makes war against Jesus the Lamb. Third, in earth’s last war, Christ and His followers are triumphant. The beast does not win; Jesus does.

Have you ever wondered what strategy the devil might use to unite the nations? As observed in the recurrent times of persecution, history often repeats itself. We therefore discover valuable lessons from the collapse of the Roman Empire. When the Germanic invasions from the north threatened Western Europe, the Roman emperor Constantine turned to religion. The authority of the church combined with the power of the state became the very instrument Constantine needed. The continual strengthening of the idea of a sacred Sunday in the fourth century was a calculated political and religious move to unite the empire in a time of crisis. Constantine wanted his empire united, and the Roman Church wanted it “converted.” The renowned historian Arthur Weigall states it clearly: “The church made a sacred day of Sunday . . . largely because it was the weekly festival of the sun; for it was a definite Christian policy to take over the pagan festivals endeared to the people by tradition and give them Christian significance” (The Paganism in Our Christianity [New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928], p. 145).

At a time of great crisis, when all the world is scared, hurting, and fearful, people will be desperate for someone to bring stability and protection. This is how tyranny has arisen in the past, and there’s no reason to think it could not happen again. According to prophecy, something will bring about these final events.

Though it’s impossible to know how all this will unfold, the world has already seen how great changes can come—sometimes very quickly. Though we don’t know details about what is coming, we need to be ready for whatever it is.

Revelation 14:9 and 14:12 describe two distinct groups. One worships the beast, and one has the faith of Jesus and keeps the commandments of God—including the fourth, the one commandment the beast power thought to change. That’s the contrast. Working through the sea and land beasts, the devil attempts to undermine God’s authority by attacking the heart of worship—namely, the Sabbath. The mark of the beast is placed either on the forehead or the hand. The forehead is a symbol of the mind, where conscience, reason, and judgment are located. The hand, in contrast, is a symbol of actions and deeds.

“We have tended to overlook the fact that Sunday is the day of worship of the opposing forces . . . in the story line of the Book of Revelation. Sunday is an extremely important symbol, revealing the unbelievable craftiness and sophistry of the dragon. . . . This . . . change of God’s law expresses in one simple action the very essence of the hatred of the dragon against God in the cosmic conflict. Its simplicity is highly deceptive. The dragon has sought to usurp God’s place in the cosmos by depicting himself as the true object of worship and arguing that God’s law is unjust—that it should be changed. The dragon changed the law at the juncture within the Decalogue where God is identified (cont. on p. 101)
What relationship do the following verses have with Satan's final deceptions?

Revelation 12:6, 14
Daniel 7:25
2 Thessalonians 2:3, 4
Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18
1 Corinthians 10:11–13

(Cont. from inSpect, p. 100):

as Creator and Redeemer, the only one worthy of worship (Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5; cf. Rev. 4:11; 5:9, 13, 14). The change of the law manifests not only the dragon’s hatred for the will of the Lord (the law), but it is also his attempt to usurp God’s place by becoming the object of worship. . . . The universalization of this change in the law would assure him victory. (Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “The Closing of the Cosmic Conflict: Role of the Three Angels’ Messages,” unpublished manuscript, 53, 54).

The day is coming, possibly sooner than we think, when laws restricting our religious liberty will be passed. Those who diligently follow the Word of God and keep the true Sabbath of the Lord will be labeled as opposers of unity and of the overall good of society.

Revelation predicts that in the future, at a time of international crisis, our world is going to face some kind of radical political, social, religious, and moral transformation, in which Sundaykeeping will be enforced and will become “the mark of the beast.” Interestingly, or perhaps tellingly, the church of Rome claims that Sunday is the “mark” of its ecclesiastical authority: “Of course the Catholic Church claims that the change was her act. . . . And the act is a mark of her ecclesiastical power and authority in religious matters” (American Catholic Quarterly Review, January 1883). Again, we have not been told how all of this will unfold. Scripture gives us only broad outlines, but enough to show us that the great controversy is going to climax around the issue of worshiping either the beast or the Creator, and that the seventh-day Sabbath will play a central role in the conflict.

(Cont. from inSight, p. 103):

the vile to take counsel against the people of God. Wealth, genius, education, will combine to cover them with contempt. Persecuting rulers, ministers, and church members will conspire against them. With voice and pen, by boasts, threats, and ridicule, they will seek to overthrow their faith. By false representations and angry appeals they will stir up the passions of the people. Not having a “Thus saith the Scriptures” to bring against the advocates of the Bible Sabbath, they will resort to oppressive enactments to supply the lack. To secure popularity and patronage, legislators will yield to the demand for a Sunday law. Those who fear God cannot accept an institution that violates a precept of the Decalogue. On this battlefield comes the last great conflict of the controversy between truth and error. And we are not left in doubt as to the issue. Now, as in the days of Mordecai, the Lord will vindicate His truth and His people.

By the decree enforcing the institution of the papacy in violation of the law of God, our nation will disconnect herself fully from righteousness. When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when, under the influence of this threefold union, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government, and shall make provision for the propagation of papal falsehoods and delusions, then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near. (Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948], vol. 5, 450, 451.)
THE SABBATH TEST

Perhaps even now, the stage is being set for this impending persecution. On June 6, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI made an urgent appeal to more than 15,000 people gathered in St. Peter’s Square in Rome, proclaiming that Sunday must be a day of rest for everyone so that people can be free to be with their families and with God. “By defending Sunday, one defends human freedom.” This, of course, isn't the same thing as demanding that others keep this day as opposed to the biblical Sabbath, but it does show that the idea of Sunday as the “day of rest” is a real issue. Laws will be passed sooner or later, and those who faithfully follow the Word of God and keep the true Sabbath will be labeled opposers to society’s best interests.

In this time of crisis God’s faithful people will, by His grace and through His power, stand firm in their convictions to follow Him. They will not yield to the pressure. Instead of the mark of the beast, they will receive the seal of God. In ancient times seals were used to attest to the authenticity of official documents. We would then expect to find God’s seal embedded in His law. Ancient seals were a distinctive, individualized mark. Isaiah the prophet says, “Bind up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples” (Isa. 8:16).

The fourth commandment contains three elements of an authentic seal: first, the name of the Sealer: “The LORD your God” (Exod. 20:10); second, the title of the Sealer: the Lord who “made,” or the Creator (verse 11); and third, the territory of the Sealer: “the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them” (verse 11). According to Revelation 7:1–3, the seal of God is placed only on our foreheads, a symbol of our minds. Jesus respects our freedom of choice. He invites us to let Him shape our minds by His Holy Spirit so that we cannot be moved from the anchor of our faith in the Word of God (Eph. 4:30). Thus, we understand that the faithful are those who “keep the commandments of God, and [have] the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12), and included in those commandments is the fourth, the one commandment the beast power thought to change.

Meditate on Matthew 19:16–22 again and look for where Jesus is.

What conditions can you see currently developing that could potentially lead to the restrictions of our religious liberty? What obstacles remain, as well?

How do you see Jesus differently after this week’s study?

How do you see Jesus differently or see Him again?

Prayer Response:
ENDGAME

Satan’s policy in this final conflict with God’s people is the same that he employed in the opening of the great controversy in heaven. He professed to be seeking to promote the stability of the divine government, while secretly bending every effort to secure its overthrow. And the very work which he was thus endeavoring to accomplish he charged upon the loyal angels. The same policy of deception has marked the history of the Roman Church. It has professed to act as the vicegerent of Heaven, while seeking to exalt itself above God and to change His law. Under the rule of Rome, those who suffered death for their fidelity to the gospel were denounced as evildoers; they were declared to be in league with Satan; and every possible means was employed to cover them with reproach, to cause them to appear in the eyes of the people and even to themselves as the vilest of criminals. So it will be now. While Satan seeks to destroy those who honor God’s law, he will cause them to be accused as lawbreakers, as men who are dishonoring God and bringing judgments upon the world.

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

Those who honor the Bible Sabbath will be denounced as enemies of law and order, as breaking down the moral restraints of society, causing anarchy and corruption, and calling down the judgments of God upon the earth. Their conscientious scruples will be pronounced obstinacy, stubbornness, and contempt of authority. They will be accused of disaffection toward the government. Ministers who deny the obligation of the divine law will present from the pulpit the duty of yielding obedience to the civil authorities as ordained of God. In legislative halls and courts of justice, commandment keepers will be misrepresented and condemned. A false coloring will be given to their words; the worst construction will be put upon their motives. As the Protestant churches reject the clear, Scriptural arguments in defense of God’s law, they will long to silence those whose faith they cannot overthrow by the Bible. Though they blind their own eyes to the fact, they are now adopting a course which will lead to the persecution of those who conscientiously refuse to do what the rest of the Christian world are doing, and acknowledge the claims of the papal sabbath.

The dignitaries of church and state will unite to bribe, persuade, or compel all classes to honor the Sunday. The lack of divine authority will be supplied by oppressive enactments. Political corruption is destroying love of justice and regard for truth; and even in free America, rulers and legislators, in order to secure public favor, will yield to the popular demand for a law enforcing Sunday observance. Liberty of conscience, which has cost so great a sacrifice, will no longer be respected. In the soon-coming conflict we shall see exemplified the prophet’s words: “The dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.” Revelation 12:17. (Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911], 591, 592.)

The same masterful mind that plotted against the faithful in ages past is still seeking to rid the earth of those who fear God and obey His law. Satan will excite indignation against the humble minority who conscientiously refuse to accept popular customs and traditions. Men of position and reputation will join with the lawless and (cont. on p. 101)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

In what ways has Satan’s end-time strategy been clarified for you? In what ways has Christ’s plan and assurance of salvation been clarified for you?

What lessons can we take away from what has been written in Ezekiel 20:1–20?

When it comes to biblical prophecy, why must we be careful not to get into fanaticism, date setting, or speculating beyond what inspiration has revealed to us?

What have been the results when the expected events have not unfolded when and how people have said they would happen (e.g., the Great Disappointment)?

How do we respond to those who say our scenario about the mark of the beast and persecution cannot happen because it just doesn’t seem possible given the current state of the world?

What are some examples of how quickly you have seen great changes come to the world?