

**FOR EVERYONE
BIBLE STUDY GUIDES**



REVELATION

22 studies for individuals or groups



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with
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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF REVELATION

Many people today regard Revelation as the hardest book in the New Testament. It is full of strange, lurid, and sometimes bizarre and violent imagery. You might have thought that in a world of clever movies and DVDs, stuffed full of complex imaginative imagery, we would take to Revelation like ducks to water, but it doesn't always seem to work that way. As a result, many people who are quite at home in the Gospels, Acts and Paul find themselves tiptoeing around Revelation with a sense that they don't really belong there. But they do!

This book in fact offers one of the clearest and sharpest visions of God's ultimate purpose for the whole creation, and of the way in which the powerful forces of evil, at work in a thousand ways but not least in idolatrous and tyrannous political systems, can be and are being overthrown through the victory of Jesus the Messiah and the consequent costly victory of his followers. The world we live in today is no less complex and dangerous than the world of the late first century when this book was written, and we owe it to ourselves to get our heads and our hearts around Revelation's glorious pictures as we attempt to be faithful witnesses to God's love in a world of violence, hatred and suspicion.

John, its author—sometimes called “John the Seer” or “John the Divine,” sometimes (probably wrongly) identified with the John who wrote the Gospel and epistles—is picking up a way of writing well known in the Jewish world of the time. This way of writing was designed to correspond

to, and make available, the visions and “revelations” seen by holy, prayerful people who were wrestling with the question of the divine purpose.

Like a theater audience, God’s people felt themselves in the dark. As they studied their ancient Scriptures and said their prayers, they believed that the music was building up to something, but nobody was quite sure what. But then, like someone all by themselves in a theater for the first performance, the *seer*—the word reflects the reality, “one who sees” something that other people do not—finds that the curtain is suddenly pulled up. In a flash the seer is witnessing a scene, is in fact invited to be part of a scene, within God’s ongoing drama.

Revelation—the idea, and this book—are based on the ancient Jewish belief that God’s sphere of being and operation (heaven) and our sphere (earth) are not after all separated by a great gulf. They meet and merge and meld into one another in all kinds of ways. For ancient Jews, the place where this happened supremely was the temple in Jerusalem; this is not unimportant as the action proceeds. Most humans seem blind to this, only seeing the earthly side of the story. Some are aware that there is more to life, but are not quite sure what it’s all about. Ancient Jews struggled to see both sides of the story, though it was often too much of an effort.

There are several things we learn in the very first verses of the book. First, this book is a four-stage *revelation*. It is about something God has revealed to Jesus himself and which Jesus is then passing on, via an angel, to “his servants” through one particular servant, John (Revelation 1:1). God—Jesus—angel—John—churches. These lines get blurred as the book goes on, but the framework remains basic.

Second, the book takes the form of an extended *letter*. There are particular letters in chapters 2 and 3 to the seven churches in western Turkey, but the book as a whole is a letter from John to all the churches, telling them what he has seen (Revelation 1:4).

Third, the book is a *prophecy* (Revelation 1:3). Like many prophets in ancient Israel, John draws freely on earlier biblical traditions. These were in themselves revelations of God and his purposes. Again and again, they come up fresh, in new forms.

Fourth, the book functions as *witness* (Revelation 1:2). Here we meet a familiar problem. The Greek words for “witness” and “testimony” are basically the same, but it’s hard to settle on one of these English words to the exclusion of the other. We should, though, remember two things whenever we see either word.

They regularly carry a sense that God is ultimately conducting a great heavenly lawcourt. In that lawcourt, the “witness” borne by Jesus and his followers is a key to the ultimate judgment and verdict.

They regularly carry the sense which the Greek original word, *martyr*, has given to the English language. Those who bear this “testimony” may well be called to suffer, or even to die, for what they have said.

Fifth, and far and away the most important: everything that is to come flows from the central figure, Jesus himself, and ultimately from God the Father, “He Who Is and Who Was and Who Is to Come” (Revelation 1:4, 8). Even in this short opening John manages to unveil a good deal of what he believes about God and Jesus, and about the divine plan. God is the Almighty, the beginning and the end (Revelation 1:8); Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and this title occurs at the beginning and the end of John’s book (see 22:13). Other lords and rulers will claim similar titles, but there is only one God to whom they belong.

(For more on this book of the Bible, also see my *Revelation for Everyone* published by SPCK and Westminster John Knox, on which this guide is based. New Testament quotations in this guide are from my own translation, published as *The Kingdom New Testament* by HarperOne in the United States and published as *The New Testament for Everyone* by SPCK in England.)

When John was writing Revelation, the early Christian movement grew and developed momentum throughout the latter part of the first century. Still, many questions emerged. What was God doing now? What were his plans for the little churches dotted around the Mediterranean world? Where was it all going?

In particular, why was God allowing followers of Jesus to suffer persecution? What line should they take when faced with the fastest

growing “religion” of the time, namely, the worship of Caesar, the Roman emperor? Should they resist?

There may have been several groups of Christians in ancient Turkey, where John seems to have been based. They would have been mostly poor, meeting in one another’s homes. By contrast, people were building grand and expensive temples for Caesar and his family in various cities, eager to show Rome how loyal they were. What would Jesus himself say about this? Did it mean that, after all, the Christians were wasting their time, following a crucified Jew rather than the one who was rather obviously the “lord of the world”?

As we will see through this guide (prepared with the help of Kristie Berglund, for which I am grateful), Revelation is written to say *no* to that last question—and to say much more besides. At its center is a fresh “revelation of Jesus the Messiah” (1:1). John, with his head and his heart full of Israel’s Scriptures, discovered on one particular occasion, as he was praying, that the curtain was pulled back. He found himself face to face with Jesus himself.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDY

1. As you begin each study, pray that God will speak to you through his Word.
2. Read the introduction to the study and respond to the “Open” question that follows it. This is designed to help you get into the theme of the study.
3. Read and reread the Bible passage to be studied. Each study is designed to help you consider the meaning of the passage in its context. The commentary and questions in this guide are based on my own translation of each passage found in the companion volume to this guide in the For Everyone series on the New Testament (published by SPCK and Westminster John Knox).
4. Write your answers to the questions in a personal journal. Each study includes three types of questions: observation questions, which ask

about the basic facts in the passage; interpretation questions, which delve into the meaning of the passage; and application questions, which help you discover the implications of the text for growing in Christ. Writing out your responses can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word.

5. Each session features selected comments from the For Everyone series. These notes provide further biblical and cultural background and contextual information. They are designed not to answer the questions for you but to help you along as you study the Bible for yourself. For even more reflections on each passage, you may wish to have on hand a copy of the companion volume from the For Everyone series as you work through this study guide.
6. Use the guidelines in the "Pray" section to focus on God, thanking him for what you have learned and praying about the applications that have come to mind.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GROUP MEMBERS

1. Come to the study prepared. Follow the suggestions for individual study mentioned above. You will find that careful preparation will greatly enrich your time spent in group discussion.
2. Be willing to participate in the discussion. The leader of your group will not be lecturing. Instead, she or he will be asking the questions found in this guide and encouraging the members of the group to discuss what they have learned.
3. Stick to the topic being discussed. These studies focus on a particular passage of Scripture. Only rarely should you refer to other portions of the Bible or outside sources. This allows for everyone to participate on equal ground and for in-depth study.
4. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they describe what they have learned. You may be surprised by their insights! Each question assumes a variety of answers. Many questions do not have "right" answers, particularly questions that

aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.
6. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have an enjoyable and profitable time together, but also that as a result of the study you will find ways that you can take action individually and/or as a group.
7. It will be helpful for groups to follow a few basic guidelines. These guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, should be read at the beginning of the first session.
 - Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.
 - We will provide time for each person present to talk if he or she feels comfortable doing so.
 - We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.
 - We will listen attentively to each other.
 - We will be very cautious about giving advice.

Additional suggestions for the group leader can be found at the back of the guide.



The Seven Churches of Asia

JESUS REVEALED

Revelation 1

Some years ago there was an eclipse of the sun. These things happen rarely enough, and to witness it is a great experience. But staring at the sun, as it slips behind the moon and then emerges the other side, is dangerous. If you look through binoculars, or a telescope, the sun's power on your eye can do permanent damage. It can even cause blindness.

On this particular occasion, there were public warnings broadcast on radio and television, and printed in the newspapers, to the effect that people should be careful. Only look, they said, through special dark glasses. Eventually one person, who obviously had very little understanding of natural phenomena, got cross about all this. Surely, they thought, this was a "health and safety" issue. A letter was sent to the *London Times*: if this event was so dangerous, why was the government allowing it in the first place?

Fortunately, even the most totalitarian of governments has not yet been able to control what the sun and the moon get up to. But the danger of full-power sunlight is worth contemplating as we hear John speaking about his vision of Jesus.

OPEN

Have you ever stared at the sun for just a moment too long? What effect did it have on you?

STUDY

1. *Read Revelation 1:1-8.* Who is this book all about and what do we learn about him in these opening verses?
2. What does it mean that this book serves as a “testimony” or “witness” (v. 2)?
3. Even in this short opening John manages to unveil a good deal of what he believes about God and Jesus, and about the divine plan. God is the Almighty, the beginning and the end. Other “lords” and rulers will claim similar titles, but there is only one God to whom they belong.

What other “lords” in our own day make competing claims to the Almighty status that—as John testifies here—in reality belongs to God alone?

4. *Read Revelation 1:9-20.* Where is John when he writes this letter and why is he there?
5. Why would this be important to John’s original readers?

6. Exile has given John time to pray, to reflect, and now to receive the most explosive vision of God's power and love. How have you experienced God's power and love in the midst of painful or distressing situations?

7. What does John see when he turns to find out who is speaking to him (vv. 12-16)?

8. This vision of Jesus draws together the vision of two characters in one of the most famous biblical visions, that of Daniel 7. There, as the suffering of God's people reaches its height, "the Ancient of Days" takes his seat in heaven, and "one like a son of man" (in other words, a human figure, representing God's people and, in a measure, all the human race) is presented before him, and enthroned alongside him. Now, in John's vision, these two pictures seem to have merged. When we are looking at Jesus, he is saying, we are looking straight through him at the Father himself.

Why is it significant for us that the one who represents humanity and the God who rules above all come together in the person of Jesus?

9. What is John's response when he sees this vision of the "one like a son of man" in the midst of the lampstands (v. 17)?

10. Why does Jesus emphasize that he is the “living one” who holds “the keys of death and Hades” (vv. 17-18)?

11. Seven is the number of perfection, and the seven churches listed in verse 11 stand for all churches in the world, all places and all times. The seven churches need to know that Jesus himself is standing in their midst, and that the “angels” who represent and look after each of them are held in his right hand.

How might this vision of Jesus in the midst of the churches have comforted suffering believers in the first century?

12. How does it bring comfort to us today?

PRAY

Hold the picture of Jesus in your mind, detail by detail. Let those eyes of flame search you in and out. Imagine standing beside a huge waterfall, its noise like sustained thunder, and imagine that noise as a human voice, echoing around the hills and round your head. And then imagine his hand reaching out to touch you and his voice speaking the words, “Do not be afraid.” Take comfort in his presence. Give him thanks for revealing himself to you and ask that you might have eyes to see him as he truly is.

NOTE ON REVELATION 1:1

The word *revelation* has come to be used as the title for the book (not “revelations” in the plural, please note). This is partly because the original word, *apocalypse*, wasn’t well known at the time of earlier translations into English. Now, of course, *apocalypse*, and its cousin *apocalyptic*, have become well known in English. Perhaps too well known: they have come to refer not so much to the sudden unveiling of previously hidden truth, but to major events, violent and disturbing events such as natural disasters (earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis) or major and horrific human actions such as genocide in Cambodia or Rwanda.

But that isn’t quite the sense that *revelation* or *apocalypse* has in this book. John is picking up a way of writing well known in the Jewish world of the time. As mentioned earlier, this way of writing was designed to correspond to, and make available, the visions and “revelations” seen by holy, prayerful people who were wrestling with the question of the divine purpose.

LETTERS TO EPHESUS, SMYRNA, PERGAMUM AND THYATIRA

Revelation 2

I was involved some years ago in making a series of radio programs where people from quite different backgrounds came together for an hour to discuss complex and challenging topics of the day. Since this was being made by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), there were some in-house guidelines. We were not supposed, for instance, to recommend particular brand-name products on air, since the publicly funded BBC does not advertise.

But I had not expected to be pulled up short simply for answering one of the questions. A listener had written in, asking the panel, “If you could choose your religious faith, what would it be, and why?” Since I was the only obvious “religious” representative on the panel, the person chairing the discussion asked me to speak first. In my opening fifty seconds, I tried to make three points. First, I said that Christianity isn’t exactly a “religion” in the sense people mean today; it’s much bigger than that, much more all-embracing. Then I pointed out that hardly anyone actually “chooses” a faith, like someone in a supermarket picking out a particular brand of soup. Then I began to say why, granted all that, I would argue for the truth of the Christian faith and for the positive, healing, life-giving

effect it has. I was only a few words into that third section, which was after all answering the question, when I was interrupted by the chair. “Oh, Tom,” she said, “we can’t say that sort of thing on air. That’s proselytizing.”

Western society has become like that BBC employee: paranoid about any actual claims, not only that we might have the truth but that someone else might not. And then we read the New Testament and we find passages like this one in Revelation 2: “I know the blasphemy of those self-styled Jews.” We recoil. How can anyone say such things?

OPEN

Do you sometimes hesitate to speak up about things you really believe in out of fear that you might offend someone? Explain.

STUDY

1. *Read Revelation 2:1-7.* What words of praise, warning and promise are spoken to the church at Ephesus?
2. The Ephesian believers have drawn a clear line between those who are really following Jesus and those who are not (v. 2). As all church workers know, a group that is rightly concerned for the truth of the gospel may forget that the very heart of that gospel is love. What can we do to help maintain this delicate balance between truth and love in our own churches today?
3. *Read Revelation 2:8-11.* In the church at Smyrna, the Lord finds nothing to condemn. What seems to be the main focus of this letter?

4. The Jewish synagogue in Smyrna has become a “satan-synagogue”—not just in a vague, general, abusive sense, but in the rather sharply defined sense that, as “the satan” is literally “the accuser,” the synagogue in town has been “accusing” the Christians of all kinds of wickedness. What is the Lord’s advice to the church at Smyrna when it comes to responding to such accusations and their consequences (v. 10)?

5. How might we take the promise of verse 11 to heart and live as those who know that the “second death” has no power to harm the faithful?

6. *Read Revelation 2:12-17.* How does the Lord refer to the city of Pergamum in this letter (v. 13)?

7. Why might it have been particularly difficult to be a Christian in this kind of place?

This church basically made the same mistake that the Israelites committed when King Balak of Moab hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel (v. 14; see Numbers 22–24). Balaam found he couldn’t curse them; he was, to that extent, a true prophet. But he still wanted Balak’s promised reward, and so he encouraged the king to use a different tactic. Where direct spiritual attack (the curse) had failed, more subtle temptation might work; and, as often, the best temptation would be sexual. In an ancient version of the “honey-trap” beloved

aim at meaning or application. Instead the questions push us to explore the passage more thoroughly.

When possible, link what you say to the comments of others. Also, be affirming whenever you can. This will encourage some of the more hesitant members of the group to participate.

5. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to express our thoughts that we leave too little opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to also.
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