

THE
BOOK
OF
REVELATION

2017 STUDY NOTES

PART 1

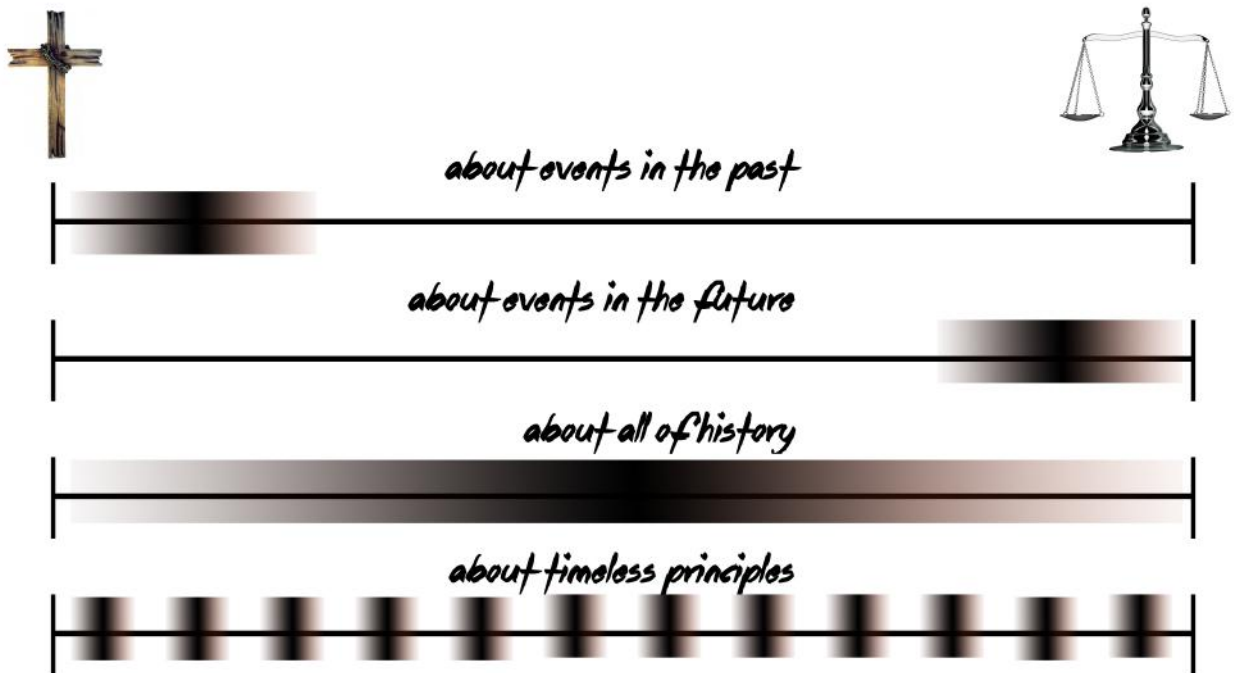
introduction

Revelation is the English translation of the original Greek title *Apocalypsis*. It's an easy guess to link that name to our word *apocalypse*, which is usually taken to mean a disaster or catastrophe. There is a whole film genre tagged *apocalyptic* which usually include global threats to human life as we know it, from diseases to freak storms, from alien invasions to zombie hordes, from stray asteroids to universal infertility. But *Apocalypse* actually means *unveiling*. It means *laying bare the truth and revealing what was hidden*. In terms of film genre's then, the book of Revelation would better fit a documentary.

Sadly, the book of Revelation has been handled so poorly for so long, that for most Christians it's anything but an *unveiling* and it really is a disaster!

However, whatever might be unclear in the book of Revelation, this is clear: Jesus is the risen and ascended lord and judge of all and that no matter how big the opposition, those who belong to him will win in the end. If you don't get anything more than that from Revelation then the book has done its job.

However, just so we are across some of the ways in which Revelation has been interpreted, see the diagram below.



1. about events in the past

The idea is that the events in Revelation happened in the time frame of the Roman empire, and should be read with that historical context in mind. In other words, the letter was written to Christians in the 1st Century Roman empire, and we need to first try to understand how they would have understood it. (John says a number of times that the things in his vision will SOON take place - in the lifespan of his readers. But it also seems clear that the "Revelation" extends all the way to the final judgement. There is at least some future focus!)

2. about events in the future

This view holds that the events in the book of Revelation were going to happen in the far distant future (at least, from the point of view of the original readers.) So, Revelation is talking about events that are still to come, including times like "the tribulation" and "the millennium."

3. about all of history

This approach sees the book of revelation as describing the key events of history from the death of Jesus to his return to judge, and that Revelation is a "timetable" by which we can interpret "signs of the times." In other words, world events TODAY are described in Revelation.

4. about timeless principles

This view says Revelation isn't talking about time - it is talking about a pattern of events or trends that will be repeated throughout history, as an encouragement to God's people of all times who face persecution. In that sense, it is a "timeless" message.

While many popular books on Revelation use approaches 2 or 3, these studies take a combination of views 1 and 4. John's vision was first and foremost a message for Christians facing persecution in the early Roman empire, but has application for Christians of all times.

Handy Hints for Revelation Readers

Understanding the book of Revelation is hard work. But surprisingly, it's written in what was originally a well recognised style. The Old Testament contains some examples of similar "Apocalyptic literature" like parts of Daniel and Ezekiel but it's a style that was used outside the bible as well. This type of literature was always full of symbolism ... which is one reason we can find it confusing.

Here are some more obvious tips for Revelation readers today:

1. Remember the original writer and his situation

John, the disciple, is writing to churches under persecution, particularly from the Roman Empire. He himself is imprisoned on the penal island of Patmos because of his faithful testimony about Jesus.

2. Remember the original readers and their situation - this is a real letter!

Most people are aware that Revelation starts with "seven letters to seven churches." But the fact is, the "seven letters" don't stop at the end of chapter 3. The whole of Revelation is aimed at these Christian communities around present day Turkey as they face up to the threat of persecution and possible death for their faith.

3. Know your enemy

As Revelation unfolds, and God's people face opposition, that opposition is described as fearsome "beasts" with multiple heads and horns and crowns. And behind them, "pulling the strings," is Satan himself. As we'll see, the beasts, horns and crowns represent the Roman Empire, with it's Caesars and regional governors. The real enemy, though, is Satan himself, who has been defeated already by Christ. Watch the battles play out in John's visions - and see who wins.

4. Reading Symbols

Symbols are "word pictures which represent something else." Rather than reading every detail literally we need to be sensitive to the writer's intention. That's not always easy, but John gives us a number of clues. The general rule is, if we really need to know the meaning of a symbol, it will be explained in the text! At other times, there are some simple "rules" we can keep in mind. Here are some examples:

a. Number Rules eg the number 7

The number 7 occurs 52 times in the book. For example, there are seven churches (1:4,11) seven spirits (1:4) and later on seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven signs. The number seven was used to denote completeness and perfection. We have other numbers that

we use in a similar way. Why, for instance, is it so important to reach 100 in cricket and be disappointed with 99?

Aside from the number 7 in Revelation, there are lots of other numbers, like "12" and its multiples, "1000", and 3½. All of them should be read with their symbolic meaning in mind.

b. Colour codes...

On the way through Revelation, you'll notice "colour codes". Most of them are familiar. White is "pure". Gold is usually "royal." Keep an eye out for them.

c. Symbolism is for feeling.

Symbolism as figurative comparison has both cognitive and emotional elements - it appeals to the head and to the heart, to our understanding and to our feelings. For example, if 'George is a wolf' is said in a context in which we understand George to be a dangerous criminal, then we understand better through the picture of a wolf that George is someone who hurts people, and this image invokes a feeling of fear. That means in coming to figurative comparison in Revelation, we should be asking not only 'what does that mean?' but also 'how does that make you feel?'

5. Get the big picture, and don't sweat on the details...

The most helpful tip for reading Revelation may come as a great relief. The fact is, you can make sense of the book without having to decode anything! Because Revelation is a "vision," it's literally packed with word pictures... and the best thing to do with any picture is stand back and look at it. Look at the big picture rather than trying to decode every brush stroke. Time after time, the big picture is totally clear. God wins. And evil, whatever its form, is overthrown. As commentator Vern Poythress says, "Revelation is a picture book, not a puzzle book. Don't become preoccupied with isolated details. Rather become engrossed in the overall story. Praise the Lord. Cheer for the saints. Detest the beast. Long for the final victory."

Getting Started

Pray.

In coming to read the book of Revelation, what hopes or questions do you have?

Like all good introductions, the introduction of the book of Revelation shows us how best to read and understand the rest of the book.

Read Revelation 1:1-3 below

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

What is a revelation? (see the Intro) What does it imply?

What 2 things might it mean for the Revelation to be of Jesus Christ?

1.

2.

In the light of these two things, what questions should we be asking as we read through the book?

1.

2.

What do you think it means to be blessed in verse 3?

What do you think it means to 'read' in verse 3? Why is this important?

Read Revelation 1:4-9 below

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

*7 Look, he is coming with the clouds,
and every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.
So shall it be! Amen.*

8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

What type of literature is being written here?

Who is addressing the seven churches?

What is the significance of the number 7 being used to refer to the churches and the spirits?

Read Daniel 7:9-14 below and compare to verse 7 above in reference to Jesus.

“As I looked,
thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
 the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
 and its wheels were all ablaze.
10 A river of fire was flowing,
 coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
 ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
 and the books were opened.
11 “Then I continued to watch because of the boastful words the horn was
speaking. I kept looking until the beast was slain and its body destroyed and thrown
into the blazing fire. 12 (The other beasts had been stripped of their authority, but
were allowed to live for a period of time.)
13 “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man,
[a]coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was
led into his presence. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all
nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an
everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never
be destroyed.

Who is Jesus?

Which coming of Jesus is being referred to in verse 7?

What does this mean for kings of the earth and those Jesus has freed from their sins? (verses 5-6)

Think about it...

As we come to read and understand the book of Revelation, these opening verses give us the right questions that we should be asking? List those questions below.

Are these the same questions you hoped would be answered? If not, what might this tell you about your questions and your hopes?

Pray

...that with gratitude to God, we would take to heart the revelation of Jesus Christ in this book as we come to read it together and privately.

... for the link missionary and church ministry your growth group has adopted for this term.

To Him who Overcomes

Pray.

to start off...

This section of Revelation is relatively straightforward. It is a series of seven letters to seven churches arced around the west of Asia Minor; or at least, seven specific introductions to the one big letter that makes up the whole of the book.

The seven churches are in an area where John had spent much of his long ministry. Some of the towns were prosperous, particularly those located close to ports and trade routes. Often John's comments relate to the commercial and social lives of the towns he is speaking to - for example, Laodicea was a famous exporter of eye ointment. John makes the point in 3:17 that they are actually "spiritually blind"- they need to buy some "spiritual eye ointment" from Jesus rather than relying on their own abilities and prosperity. Almost all the letters have some similar features (which you can find in commentaries) but don't worry if you don't understand all the details - we are aiming for the big picture here.

Read Revelation 1:4-3:22 below (perhaps one person could read the opening section in chapter 1 and then others could take turns reading the seven letters)

John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

*Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, **5** and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, **6** and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

***7** “Look, he is coming with the clouds,”*

*and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him”;*

and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”

So shall it be! Amen.

***8** “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. **10** On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, **11** which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

12 I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, **13** and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man,[d] dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. **14** The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. **15** His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. **16** In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

17 When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. **18** I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

19 "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. **20** The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

To the Church in Ephesus

2 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. **2** I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. **3** You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. **5** Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. **6** But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

To the Church in Smyrna

8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. **9** I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of

Satan. **10** Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

To the Church in Pergamum

12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. **13** I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. **15** Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. **16** Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

To the Church in Thyatira

18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. **19** I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. **21** I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. **22** So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. **23** I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, **25** except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

26 To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— **27** that one 'will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery'[g]—just as I have received authority from my Father. **28** I will also give that one the morning star. **29** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the Church in Sardis

3 *“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:*

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits[i] of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

2 *Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. **3** Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*

4 *Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. **5** The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. **6** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

To the Church in Philadelphia

7 *“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:*

*These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. **8** I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. **9** I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. **10** Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

11 *I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. **12** The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. **13** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*

To the Church in Laodicea

14 *“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:*

*These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. **15** I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! **16** So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. **17** You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. **18** I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.*

19 *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.*

21 *To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22* **Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

What overall picture is given of Jesus? Why do you think it is important for the churches to know all this about Jesus?

What do the lampstands represent? What does it mean that Jesus is standing among them? Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?

What different types of opposition are being faced by the churches?

Which churches are NOT criticised? What is it that they have done right?

What are the key criticisms Jesus has of each of the churches?

Which ones do you think are the biggest dangers to us? Why?

All the letters conclude in a similar way. Who is it that will receive the promises in each case? (See 2:7,11,17,26 and 3:5, 12, 21)

What do you think it means to "overcome."? Look at 2:25,26, 3:8, and 17:14. Can you see a connection with 13:10?

think about it ...

What other views of 'overcoming' are popular both in the church and the world? Why are they so tempting?

Look at 3:21. How did Jesus "overcome and sit down with his Father?" In what ways is this a reassurance for us?

to finish off...

The seven letters are closely tied up with the structure of the book as a whole - there are links with both the vision of the majestic Jesus in chapter 1 and the promised future in Chapter 21 and 22. The message of the letters is simple ... the victory has been won by the Son of Man, so press on! Your heavenly future is secure. Here's a review of the key points...

If you have zeal but no love, recover your love. (How are we doing with this?)

If you're faithful but fearful ... endure suffering for the crown of life that's waiting. (Will we?)

If you're seduced by false teaching and immorality ... repent. (What are we prepared to tolerate? Where should we draw the line?)

If you're lazy, asleep or dead in your faith ... wake up! (How do we urge members of our church family in this direction?)

If you're feeling weak and weary in your faith ... remember it will be worth it!

Keep at it! (Are you?)

If your obedience is lukewarm and you're complacent ... turn back and find your wealth in Jesus. (Are we maybe quite a bit too complacent?)

What can we be sure of if we feel rebuked by any of these key points? (3:19)

Pray

... by asking God for forgiveness and to help with always remaining faithful to Jesus no matter what.

... for the link missionary and church ministry your growth group has adopted for this term.

Worthy of Worship?

Pray.

Salad days with the Caesar.

In John's day, everyone throughout the Roman empire was expected to engage in emperor worship. This would include a number of things from participating in festivals honouring the emperor to offering incense on altars carried by priests to declare that Caesar was Lord. From making sacrifices to the emperor and eating the sacrificed meat, to bowing to the ground before his statue or "image". From offering incense to Caesar before entering the city to obeying Caesar without question. From acknowledging the authority of the emperor when conducting business or shopping in the market to stopping at his altars to acknowledge his "lordship" and to acknowledge the emperor as the provider of life before drawing water from public fountains.

Not surprisingly, as a Christian living under these expectations would have been very awkward. Because no matter how high the Emperor considered himself, Jesus is higher! He is the King of Kings, the Emperor of Emperors ... and John's vision reveals this in a most unusual way ...

Read Revelation 4 below

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." 2 At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. 3 And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. 4 Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. 5 From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. 6 Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the centre, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. 7 The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. 8 Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

*"Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come."*

9 Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, 10 the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

*11 "You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being."*

What's the big picture this chapter presents us with?

In a sentence, what scene is this chapter describing?

What impression do you get of the one who sits on the throne?

What quality is it about him that sets him apart from everything else? (verse 8)

Who do you think the 24 elders might represent? (think 2 sets of 12)

What are the "living creatures" doing?

Here's a thought...

What if the four "living creatures" simply represent "living creatures"? Lion, Ox, Man and Eagle are the most impressive and strongest of the creatures ... and yet when they're face to face with God, they fall before him in worship!

What 2 things in verse 11 are grounds for God to be worthy of worship?

What does sin cause us to do with our worship? (Romans 1:24,25) Why is this stupid?

What will be different about heaven (according to John's vision)? What do you think makes that difference?

*Go back and re-read Revelation 3:21. Where is Jesus, and what is he doing?
Now read Revelation 5 below*

5:1 Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. 2 And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" 3 But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. 4 I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. 5 Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals."

6 Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7 He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. 8 And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. 9 And they sang a new song, saying:

*"You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth."*

11 Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. 12 In a loud voice they were saying:

*“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honour and glory and praise!”*

13 Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

*“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”*

14 The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Step back from the details and try to gain a sense of the majesty, and surprise, of the picture the vision is painting. Look at the throne. What do you see there?

What incredible clash of imagery do you see in verses 5 and 6?

Can you explain this? How does this make you feel?

Why can't the "scroll" be opened? (We'll see in the next section that the scroll represents God's just judgement!)

How do you explain why John feels so deeply about this?

What makes the lamb worthy to open the scroll?

How many times does the chapter mention that the lamb was "slain"? What is the significance of this?

What three things has the blood of the lamb achieved? What is this imagery referring to in "real" terms?

Compare the "heavenly hymn" in verses 12 to 14 to the similar section in chapter 4 verse 11. Why is even the similar "form" of words in these two chapters incredible in itself?

Why is Jesus "worthy of worship?"

If you were a believer in the days of John and you knew that the next knock on the door could be the Roman authorities asking you to renounce Christ and worship Caesar as God, how would these two chapters help you?

Has it ever distressed you that there seems to be no one to bring God's justice to the earth? If not, what do you put that down to?

What relief is there in knowing that Jesus is worthy of bringing God's just judgement?

Pray

... for the link missionary and church ministry your growth group has adopted for this term.

Who Will Stand?

Pray.

Let's take a minute to revise the story so far. John received his vision for the benefit of Christians facing persecution under oppressive Roman rule and pagan culture. See below some historical records below of that persecution:

The Annals by Tacitus (56 - 120 AD) the senator and historian of the Roman Empire.

Annals, xv.44.5-8

... an arrest was first made of all who confessed (Christ); then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted ... Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charmer or drove about in a chariot.

Clement, the Bishop of Rome from 88 AD to his death in 99 AD wrote:

The First Epistle to the Corinthians, vi. 1-2

Associated with these men of holy life (the apostles of Peter and Paul) is a great multitude of the elect, who because of jealousy have suffered many indignities and tortures and have set a very noble example in our midst. Because of jealousy women were persecuted, who as Danaids and Dircae suffered terrible impious indignities and thereby safely completed the race of faith and, though weak in body, received a noble reward of honour.

Pliny was a lawyer, author and magistrate of Rome who wrote to the Emperor in 112 AD:

... this is the course I have taken with those who were accused before me as Christians. I asked them whether they were Christians, and if they confessed, I asked them a second and third time with threats of punishment. If they kept to it, I ordered them for execution; for I held no question that whatever it was that they admitted, in any case obstinacy

and unbending perversity deserve to be punished. There were others of the like insanity; but as these were Roman citizens, I noted them down to be sent to Rome.

Refusing to worship the Emperor or the Roman gods and being accused of atheism and cannibalism and incest, Christians attracted the ire and hatred of the society around them. In the light of such earthly torments, John's vision is a timely reminder of the heavenly splendour of the one who died as a sacrificial lamb. In fact, the lamb - now on the throne - is about to open the scroll of God's judgement.

As you read the following chapters, imagine you have seen your Christian friends put to death for remaining faithful to Jesus; Caesar and his regional governors seem invincible, the society at large despises you and forces you more and more to the margins. Will you persevere... or not? What is there to look forward to? Who will win out in the end? It all seems so very unfair. Similar questions face us today.

In chapters 6 and 7, John details the opening of the scroll mentioned in chapter 5. Only the "lamb that was slain" was worthy to open it - now he does so, one seal at a time.

STRUCTURE

From chapter 6 to chapter 16, the book of Revelation unfolds in a series of 'sevens'. First, the seven seals on the scroll are opened. Then there are seven trumpets. Later there are seven bowls of God's wrath. All three sequences of seven seem to be parallel descriptions of life in the world under God's judgement, with each cycle ending with a sense of final victory for God's people.

Compare Rev 8:5 with 11:19 and 16:18. What are the similarities?

Compare Rev 6: 17; 11:15 and 16: 17. What "tone" do you get in each?

The things that take place in the above verses are typical of our time. Military conquests, wars, famines, and disasters – are part of human existence as we wait for a better heavenly place. But the pressing problem is, so many Christians are caught up in the crossfire. In fact, so much of the violence seems to be unfairly aimed at them... especially if you're a Christian in the Roman Empire.

Read chapter 6 below

I watched as the Lamb opened the first of the seven seals. Then I heard one of the four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, "Come!" 2 I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.

3 When the Lamb opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" 4 Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword.

5 When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. 6 Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"

7 When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" 8 I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

10 They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" 11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

12 I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, 13 and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. 14 The heavens receded like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

15 Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and everyone else, both slave and free, hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. 16 They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! 17 For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?"

What do each of the first four seals represent? Do you think the end of verse 8 gives any clues about the sort of application first century Christians would have found here?

Why had the "souls under the altar " in 6: 9 been slain? How do they fit in to John's aim in recording the vision (see Chapter 1) and his own situation?

In chapter 6, What happens to the mighty Kings and Princes who so terrorised the first Christians?

Read Revelation 7 below

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree. 2 Then I saw another angel coming up from the east, having the seal of the living God. He called out in a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: 3 "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." 4 Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

5 From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,

from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,

from the tribe of Gad 12,000,

6 from the tribe of Asher 12,000,

from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,

from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,

7 from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,

from the tribe of Levi 12,000,

from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,

8 from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,

from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,

from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. 10 And they cried out in a loud voice:

*"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."*

11 All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying:

*"Amen!
Praise and glory*

*and wisdom and thanks and honour
and power and strength
be to our God for ever and ever.
Amen!"*

13 Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"

14 I answered, "Sir, you know."

And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore,

*"they are before the throne of God
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne
will shelter them with his presence.*

*16 'Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.*

*The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.*

*17 For the Lamb at the centre of the throne
will be their shepherd;*

'he will lead them to springs of living water.'

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

This is a chapter rich in symbolic language. There's the famous crowd of 144,000 - which really just seems to represent a perfect number of "faithful Jewish Christians." Our major interest as Gentile Christians should be the other crowd, dressed in white ... and we're told what brand of washing powder they used to get them clean.

Who is "the multitude" and what are they doing?

How did they get here?

How are their clothes "made white"?

Again, what re-assurance is there in this vision for suffering Christians?

Pray

... for the persecuted church.

... that we would remain faithful to Jesus no matter what.

... for the link missionary and church ministry your growth group has adopted for this term.