

# **Extra Study Material for the book of Revelation**

## **Why Revelation?**

*From a blog series published 2018, adapted by Robin Dugall*

Revelation is a book many people would rather ignore. With its violent imagery and a sword-wielding, warrior Jesus who seems straight out of a Hollywood movie, it hardly seems to emulate the “Love thine enemies” Jesus of the gospels. Revelation seemed to be like the tabloids, a book many had turned into a sensationalist roadmap for the end of the world. And the violence! One scene has blood up to a horse’s eyeballs flowing down a street for two hundred miles! With seven headed beasts, red dragons, images of cataclysmic destruction, reading the entire book through in preparation for our first class did little to assuage our reservations.

Besides the skewed reading of the violence, Revelation has also been misused as a crystal ball over the centuries, in a (failed) attempt to predict the end of the world. Christians supposedly get suctioned up to heaven in a strange event called the “rapture”.

So, why should we read the book of Revelation?

As you can see from the title of this article, Revelation needs to be rescued for us despite our deep reservations. Rescued from a crystal ball understanding. Rescued from being puzzling and irrelevant to being a profound, practical book. As we take a deeper look, rest assured, your misconceptions will begin to be dispelled.

The important proviso as we set out was that it be properly explained, and we had a good teacher for the journey ahead. Through an online video series put on by The Great Courses®, Craig Koester quickly became a teacher we could trust. He too had enthusiasm, enough to make it a major focus of his life’s studies. He was engaging, clear and like any good teacher, in love with his subject matter. His lecture became the diving board into greater depths.

When we were about half-way through the course, we reflected on what had helped to change our minds. What images, thoughts or themes helped deepen the book or make it more understandable? Maybe some of our thoughts will help as you begin this journey with us.

## ***Keep Turning the Page***

Early in our course, Craig Koester gave some advice which would provide one of the keys to rescuing this book.

*“If you’re disturbed by what you’re reading, keep turning the page.”*

This simple phrase was good advice. Many people never get beyond the sensationalism. They read ominous scenes of horrific monsters and stop, skipping over the hopeful ones without a second glance.

But if you keep reading, you’ll see a pattern. Every time the visions seem to take us to the brink of disaster, there is a new scene rich with promise and possibility on the next page. Koester reminded us to keep going in order to understand the deeper meaning behind the violent imagery. Like a Magic Eye picture, depth emerges when you know how to see the pattern.

This phrase became a shorthand prompt for us, reminding us that violence and destruction don’t have the last word. Even when we think things are going down the tube, God remains with God’s people until the end. Things get turned on their heads in ways we can’t imagine on our own steam, despite the suffering of the moment. Maybe, just maybe, the misinterpreted, tabloid version of Revelation out in dominant culture isn’t what was meant.

## ***About All That Violence***

Like a vivid dream, Revelation is chock full of word pictures, many of them violent. They are powerful and confusing at the same time. The word pictures were communicating historical events of the time, but not in a

literal way, and if you take them literally now, you miss the point entirely. The language of Revelation is the language of *Apocalyptic literature*, and when we let the images work together to impact our hearts, they can change and motivate us to move in a different direction. This is much more profound than what you could say in a literal way.

For example, there is a seven-headed-beast who is crawling out of the sea in order to take over the world. This image doesn't tell us to watch for news reports for beasts like this, but to show what happens when the power of the state becomes destructive. Those oppressed by political realities around the world would understand this intimidating picture instantly.

Apocalyptic language was used by Jewish revolutionaries especially in the first century, and it expressed the feelings of people oppressed and crushed by the brutal nation states. These people needed hope in the midst of what felt like the absolute abandonment by God. Walk into any Alcoholics Anonymous meeting today, and it'd sound much the same!

We began to see the images as though they were from a superhero comic book, where insane, deranged figures dominate the pages and crazy exaggeration is the name of the game. People make statues to the tyrannical monster from the sea or a crazed woman is holding a cup containing the blood of the people she's killed.

Revelation is often called the literature of the oppressed, and when oppressed people start to feel crushed beyond their limits to endure, they begin to feel violent. This type of writing, with its superheroes and villains, reached out to a people who were either persecuted by or tempted to acquiesce to the powers of the dominant empire of the day.

For those in our community who did not want to read the ludicrous images from Revelation, understanding the nature of Apocalyptic language helped us be patient enough to look beneath the images to try to understand what they meant to the original readers and what they could possibly mean for us.

### ***Lamb Power***

One theme quickly became the central guiding image and key to the whole book. Early in Revelation (chapter 5), there are seven sealed scrolls, and John is wondering who was worthy to open them. It's a character issue. Who has the personality qualities needed to open the scroll that holds the secret about God's power, about God's rule, and about how God overcomes evil?

And in this pivotal scene, the anchor of the book, the Angel tells John to look at the Lion of Judah. John turns to look, expecting to see a ferocious messiah who everyone expects will break the scroll's seals and redeem all the suffering with violent force. But the whole plot turns, because instead of a savage lion, he sees a butchered Lamb. "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders." (Rev. 5:6)

Paradoxically, this ultimate image of weakness is the most powerful symbol of all. People knew that this slain lamb referred to Jesus Christ, who lovingly took a bullet for us, who ruled through sacrificing his life rather than domination, who didn't just die but came back to life. Though it looked like he was losing, in the end He triumphed over evil. In their similar circumstances, this lamb was showing them the way. This lamb who showed love through self-sacrifice and not violence, is the ultimate warrior. This lamb has the character of God.

In our first study night, the world was reeling from the shocking news from Paris, where 11 people had been murdered who had worked for the satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo, which used cartoons to mock Catholicism, Judaism, Islam and various other groups. It struck us that situations like this echoed Revelation, where disenfranchised people became roaring lions, inflicting violence and doing evil to other people. Unlike the slain lamb, these people thought they could win the battle for truth through violence. They were really laboring under a false interpretation of things.

The Christ of Revelation is not a warrior lion who devours people and rules by force. He's a warrior more like a Lamb who gives its life for others. This Messiah is relentless in His willingness to lay down His life for others. In today's world, where responding to violence usually means more violence, it's an upside-down image.

The image of the slain lamb became central for us and is reflected by the photo at the top of this page. Our community started to use a code for it — "Lamb Power". Lamb power exists when we live not with our own ego or power, but with the same sacrificial love as Christ. When we suffer under a false interpretation of things, just as the first century Christians did, we need to look for deeper ways of seeing.

Because Revelation is so difficult to interpret, "Lamb Power" becomes a cipher or code to understand the bizarre imagery. It is shorthand for the truth that "victory lies in weakness". If we keep remembering this central image, we can "keep turning the pages" as Koester reminded us, even when the images are wild and we have no clue what's going on. Revelation is a call for us to believe that the way of Jesus trumps the power of the empire.

### ***A User's Guide to Revelation***

Over coffee one day, I told a friend that my church was studying the book of Revelation. She said that she had gone to church her whole life but confessed that all she knew and loved from this odd book at the back of the Bible were the comforting images of heavenly streets of gold and the promise of "no more tears".

My friend isn't alone. Many of us feel exactly that way. Scenes of glory brought solace but...a sinister seven-headed monster, the great harlot who rides its back, rivers of blood, fire falling from the sky — these were the bits I just ignored in bewilderment. Some turn away in terror.

Worse still, others use it as a crystal ball to predict the future, or to speculate about the identity of the Antichrist. Revelation has a reputation as the most misinterpreted book of the Bible. It's no wonder many people want little to do with it. Yet the book has much to offer provided we interpret it correctly.

And to do that, we need help. How quickly we reach for instructions to operate technology or assemble Ikea purchases, but when it comes to navigating baffling books, we assume we can jump in with little or no guidance. What better way to begin our study of this profound book than with a *User's Guide*. Here are some guiding principles our community found helpful as we began our study.

#### *Principle #1 - Get beyond the sensationalism*

In Craig Koester's course, he points out that this is our first step. Those who focus on the scary bits and predict the end of the world are not actually reading Revelation but creating a theological system by combining parts of the Bible together to paint a picture which the author never intended. Revelation's call to the first readers was to persevere in the face of challenges, not to escape in some kind of rapture or provide prophetic timelines.

#### *Principle #2 - Wear the correct reading glasses*

To understand Revelation, you most definitely need to know what you are reading and how to read it, and the reading glasses we need are likely trifocal.

Literary lens — Many people read Revelation's bizarre images thinking they need to be understood literally and used to predict the future, but this type of reading narrows the meaning and distorts the intended message. If it's a book of predictions, the impression is that destruction is inevitable, like a hurricane you need to prepare for. Seeing the images in a literary and symbolic way broadens the meaning and is much more hopeful and encouraging. One helpful approach is to interpret Revelation's imagery in much the same way as you would be reading *The Lord of the Rings* or viewing *Star Wars*. Like Revelation, both are metaphorical battles between

good and evil. From a literary perspective, we need to assume God is on the side of life not death. Death and violence are not the final words.

The lens of historical context — When we start to read Revelation, we begin with the 1st century, not the 21st, interpreting the symbols within their context, not ours. What did the images of Revelation mean for the first readers? Revelation was written to and for them first. What issues were they confronting which Revelation addressed? What was John trying to do to help them stay faithful in their context?

The lens of our own situation — After we've read it with 1st century lenses, we can more faithfully figure out what it means for us. Are we in the same world at all? In what way? The beauty of the Bible is that when we overhear a Word of wisdom in someone else's context, we can receive a Word as well. The early Christians heard that despite dire circumstances, God is provident. Though it often doesn't look like it, God's sacrificial love rather than domination wins in the end. God is in the business of re-creating the world and establishing justice among nations and individuals. The hope of God's ultimate reign sustains our long-suffering. All people will come into the Kingdom of God. These are simple and profound messages for us as well, even if sometimes they're told in a complicated way.

Using the trifocal lenses of literary, historical context and our own situation corrects the focus. Not wearing them would be to miss the genius of the book. What is behind Revelation are not questions of when, or why, but rather of Who. Who is at the center? Who is at the helm of history?

Who is this God in whose hands the future finally belongs? God as expressed through the sacrificial lamb is the Who of Revelation. A God whose love is neither retributive nor coercive but, as author Brad Jersak puts it, self-giving, co-suffering and all-embracing.

Putting these glasses on leads us to worship and to experiencing Revelation as a book of inspiration and hope. If you're not blessed by reading Revelation, you haven't read it right.

### *Principle #3 - Don't just read it alone*

It's also important to read Revelation in community, in the company of other faith pilgrims, whether in person or online in this study. When we read it in a covenanted Christ community with prayerful humility and through the lens of a "Love Letter" from a faithful father, we will hear the message of Revelation with ears of trusting children.

### *Principle #4 - Keep turning the pages*

Revelation has been described as cyclical, with visions that repeat and overlap, rotating from bright and festive to ominous and threatening. A piecemeal reading suggests it's all doom and gloom but as you keep turning the pages, you'll discover it's a book about hope. Every time there's a threatening scene, a new one filled with possibility is on the next page.

The violence in Revelation keeps getting softened and turned in another direction. Jesus responds to violence not with violence but by loving and even dying for his enemies and giving us courage through his life. The really ironic thing is that John uses a violent genre, Apocalyptic literature, in order to do that.

### Questions for Engagement

- What are your associations with Revelation to this point? Have you ever studied it?
- Are any of these guiding principles to studying Revelation (getting beyond the sensationalism, using the trifocal lens of seeing the scripture literarily, in 1st and 21st century contexts, reading it in community, and to keep turning the pages) new to you? What came to mind as you read them?
- What are some guiding symbols or metaphors that have been helpful in your life?

- Why is it important to be focusing on our work today and not try to divine the future?
- Have you had an image of God that has helped see you through a tough time?
- How do you conceive of God speaking to you in your life? Do you trust your prayer experiences, dreams, the visionary experiences of others, official church statements, or other types of inspiration to guide your own life choices? Why or why not?

### ***Revelation: The Original Graphic Novel?***

When my son became a teenager, it became more difficult to inspire him to read a book. This had never been a problem before. We were stuck and unsure until I came across a graphic novel version of *Frankenstein* at the local library, and his enthusiasm returned. In his adolescent world, the vivid pictures and rich story reached him like nothing else had.

John must have known the same thing as he painted the vivid word pictures of *Revelation* for his community. The visions would be well suited for a graphic novel. Pictures can communicate great truth, sometimes reaching and impacting an audience, especially an oppressed one, in a way that more cerebral words cannot.

Vernard Eller, in his book *The Most Revealing Book in the Bible*, compares the book of *Revelation* to Picasso's famous painting, *Guernica*, (1937). Known as one of the most moving and powerful anti-war paintings in history, Picasso had painted it in reaction to the Nazis' bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Painted in black, grey and white, it is full of symbols which convey the intense suffering of war. The images are timeless and universal. Both animals and people are affected — bulls and horses, a mother with a dead child, a dead soldier, an imploring man.

You won't recognize any telltale details from *Guernica* like you would in a photo, such as street names or people's identities, but to look for factual truth would be to miss the point. The details are exaggerated and full of discord. They work together to create an impact that an undistorted snapshot never could. Anyone who had experienced the bombing in 1937 would have agreed that the painting expressed no factual accuracy but what some call "meaning truth". And this is the truth that still grabs us in Picasso's painting all these years later.

In all times and places, war has inflicted trauma on so many, even for generations after the war is technically over. And of course, there are many kinds of wars, not just those between countries. Addictions, relational discord, physical or mental illness, poverty, loss, hunger, loneliness — Picasso's images grab our hearts, reminding us of evil's dark fruit, the terrible disruption of existence itself.

John too needed to express the horror of the times at hand, but he had an even greater task as he sat down to record the visions of *Revelation*, describing not just one event but the total enormity of world evil. There is another significant difference between Picasso and John. As we'll see in upcoming blogposts, the dark images in *Revelation* are answered by the image of a slaughter-marked lamb. Nothing else will right evil's tendency to get worse.

### ***The Audience of Revelation***

Who can forget the photo of 3-year old Aylan Kurdi in 2015? Found washed ashore after his family was fleeing war in Syria, his heart-breaking death became a worldwide wake-up call to the refugee crisis.

Picasso's painting had the same effect in 1937, not just on the citizens of Guernica, but around the world. It caught the world's attention when it went on a brief worldwide tour, telling the news of the Spanish Civil War like no other media reports had.

Both situations had alarming pictures which disturbed our comfort, but a context of intense suffering was behind it. Those in suffering were no doubt saying, "Thank God someone is hearing about our plight. Maybe now something will change."

The disturbing images of Revelation reflected some desperate times as well. Hearing John's visions in the first century, the early Christians would have understood immediately, just as those in the town of Guernica understood Picasso's painting. Just who were these people and what were they going through?

### *Audience of Revelation - The Persecuted*

Some early Christians, including the author of Revelation, experienced persecution and open hostility from Rome because of their faith. In the most extreme cases, allegiance with God in Christ meant torture and death. Even the writer John was imprisoned on the island of Patmos as the authorities figured out that his message was subversive. John was highly critical of the status quo and a sharp advocate for change.

Many people didn't know what to make of the Christians. They worshipped only one God, and put their faith in a crucified, risen God. To say that Jesus (not Caesar) was Lord meant Jesus was the Messiah, King and Risen One. This gave Christians a higher form of loyalty than Rome's rulers and it made people nervous.

It meant they didn't fit in with the local Jews either. Persecution was not a systematic campaign, imposed from the top down. It was local and sporadic. It started when local people grew uneasy about the presence of Christians.

A word about Revelation's language — When people are oppressed, the only language that makes sense are the shocking words of a revolutionary. Koester points out that unlike the rest of the New Testament, the original Greek in Revelation confounds translators as it breaks all grammar rules.

The language of Revelation is non-conformist and defiant. Just as a wise mentor knows exactly what to say and how to say it, no matter the situation, John chose his words well. Knowing his audience was oppressed, John used bad Greek to make a point, choosing a counter-cultural form of speech for his counter-cultural message. Like the distorted images of Guernica, John's language was subversive, similar to the black people who cried, "I ain't gonna take this no more!" People in suffering listen to "voices from the margins," and John understood his role as a prophet. His street language would have reached the oppressed.

### *Audience of Revelation - The Assimilated*

While some Christians faced open hostility, others simply felt a subtler pressure to conform. Life in an inter-religious world gave them some sticky dilemmas. Should they eat food sacrificed to idols? Should they go to festivals dedicated to local gods like Dionysus or Artemis to preserve friendships or business contacts? Their faith set them apart. How were they to stay true to their convictions while getting along socially with neighbors who didn't share their faith? How far could they blend into their surroundings before they lost their identity?

A modern parallel might be seen in China today. While China has recently changed to a 2-child policy, stories of the pressures to conform in the old days are prevalent. Those who did not conform to the 1-child policy were penalized with social shunning, docked wages or even termination, hefty fines, forced abortions and even the euthanizing of female babies.

Rome had its own seductive propaganda. Christians were manipulated and wooed into the worship of empire, and following a different way meant paying the price if you didn't conform. The visions of Revelation challenged the myth of Rome. The Jesus movement was a home for people who were disoriented by Rome's manipulation. It could be expensive, restrictive and oppressive to follow Christ.

Assimilation happens to us when we are under the illusion of "the way things are," blithely not thinking about things. Author Walter Bruggemann calls this the illusion of empire. The dominant culture puts us to sleep so soundly that we don't even know when something is wrong. We think if we're loyal to the empire, then

somehow, we're secure, but when things are at their worst, the cracks start showing. Selling out leads to deadening pain and the need for change appears. So, it's a wakeup call for us.

### *Audience of Revelation - The Complacent/The Comfortable*

Others in the 1st century were so wealthy and comfortable they saw no problem at all with the dominant culture of Rome. The letters in the first chapters of Revelation confronted them. They didn't need anything economically, but in terms of faith, they were "Wretched, poor, pitiable, blind and naked." They'd lost their edge, more preoccupied with the brightness of their economic future than the shadow of Roman persecution. Comfort was valued above all else. Sadly, like any society, the comfort of the few is supported by the suffering of the many.

It doesn't take much imagination to see ourselves as complacent. Even if we are seduced into thinking that all is right with the world as long as all is right in our world, there's a deeper truth if we open our eyes. There is a battle going on in the world and in our souls. We are always poorer than we realize.

We are never just "one" of these 3 stages (persecuted, assimilated, or complacent/comfortable). Perhaps you can see yourself in any of these 3 situations. For those who feel threatened, Revelation is a book of encouragement to keep the faith amid open hostility. It encourages us to know that truth will prevail. For those who are just trying to assimilate and get along with their neighbors, the vision of Revelation may act as a challenge as John makes a sharp and emphatic contrast between God and those things that take God's place. For the comfortable, the message may be disturbing and challenging. Revelation calls them to open their eyes.

Whether it's an oppressive regime like Rome, the bombings in Guernica, a refugee crisis, or deadening comfort, trauma calls out different responses in us all. Revelation's message is as universal as Picasso's, and more hopeful.

One scholar I know puts it in a nutshell, "The struggling are called to persevere and have the same patient endurance that Jesus had, the complacent are to become recommitted, and the assimilated are called to a renewed sense of integrity in a complicated world."

### Questions for Engagement

- Is there a picture or graphic image that ever spoke to you more than words could at the time?
- What similarities can you see between the 1st century and our 21st century worlds?
- Persecution — What personal or cultural struggles are requiring perseverance and endurance from you?
- Assimilation — What are the challenges of opening yourself to the faith of another person out of respect to them, while still honoring and standing true to your own faith? What does it mean to stand in your own story?
- Complacency — Have you ever been challenged to move in a different direction, out of your comfort zone? What motivated you to change?

### ***The God of Second Chances***

Everyone has had the experience of waking up from a nightmare with the shaky realization that it was only a dream. With quivering exhalations, we are relieved to know that the horrors of our nighttime imagination are suddenly lifted. Life is back to normal.

The best "wake up" scene after a bad nightmare in literature has got to be Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Three ghosts take the miserly Scrooge on a visionary tour of his life. Scrooge receives hair-raising visions, and the torment of his nightmares is palpable. He is shown his painful past and even more painful future. And just like the up and down cycles of Revelation, he also sees visions that inspire hope in the warmth and love of the Cratchit home. Those encouraging scenes are a bitter contrast to his own life.

The Ghost of Christmas Future is the third and most fearsome Spirit. Reminding us of the Grim Reaper, this wordless Spirit shows Scrooge his own lonely grave. When Scrooge sees he died alone and unloved, he asks brokenly, "Answer me one question. Are these the shadows of things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"

The visions are wake-up calls for Scrooge, representing what the future holds if he does not change his ways. Scrooge pleads for mercy from the Spirit, begging for an altered fate in exchange for a reformed life. "I am not the man I was!" he cries.

When Scrooge wakes up and realizes he's been given a second chance, he is reborn. "I don't know what day of the month it is!... I don't know anything. I'm quite a baby. Never mind. I don't care. I'd rather be a baby."

### *Revelation's Wake-up Call*

Perhaps this evocative example from literature is a good start as we look at the most terrifying chapters in Revelation, the vision of the seven trumpets in chapters 8-11. In this passage, the trumpets sound one by one to cue the apocalyptic events John saw in his vision. Like Scrooge, we are taken on a series of visionary, and terrifying, journeys as we read them, and scholars say it's the most difficult section of Revelation to interpret. As each trumpet blows, the horrors multiply. Fire falls from the sky, water turns to blood, and horrific evil beings slaughter one-third of humanity. Scrooge's question to the Spirit is the right one to ask about Revelation's visions as well. Is this what's going to happen, or what might happen? "Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"

What are we to make of it all? Those who use Revelation as a crystal ball think these visions are predictions. Like a hurricane, they think you can prepare for it but you can't change its inevitable path. Much ink has been wasted over the years on speculations of which modern historical event, like the Gulf War, matches each trumpet vision.

This is the futuristic perspective, and it is indeed the one we are rescuing Revelation from in this blog series. In this perspective, history looks like chaos, where God has only a script of doom to be played out for most of the world.

A literary perspective on the other hand is much more hopeful and encouraging. Like Scrooge's ghosts, Revelation's visions do not predict literal events but provide a wake-up call for humankind. The goal of the book is to exhort us to faithfulness to God through a new vision. The God we see in the throne room of Revelation 4 is the Creator and life-giver. When Jesus the lamb enters, all beings break out in praise.

This piece of context is crucial, for if God is the Creator and life-giver, why would he want to destroy it all? From a literary perspective, we need to assume God is on the side of life not death. Like Scrooge, we ask, "Why would God show us this if we are past all hope?" We are shown the visions precisely because there is still hope for us and the earth.

### *A Taste of Revenge*

We have to ask then, what is the Christic/Christological meaning to these "nasty bits," these difficult sections? To answer this question, it's helpful to remember the victims and martyrs of Revelation 6 who, like the oppressed in every age, cry out, "How long oh Lord?" In Revelation 8-11, we see that God has not forgotten them. God gives them a taste of what revenge would look like, a vision every victim has entertained. Whether the infraction is small or large, everyone wants to see justice done on the perpetrators.

Many of us have had struggles with the feeling of needing to take revenge. We get hurt and we begin to entertain ways not just to "get back" but to "get even or ahead." Yet we all know the hard truth about



bitterness, unforgiveness and the struggle with vengeance. Though sweet tasting in the moment, they have to be released. We all realize in life (thanks to the Word of God and the conviction of the Holy Spirit ) that not only would revenge harm the individual that is the focus of our ire, but it would become a downward spiral for us as well. Sadly, not everyone puts the fantasies aside. The story of vengeance gets played out on an international scale and in our own families and communities on a regular basis.

The visions of the trumpets and plagues shows that God could hurl down vengeful judgement, but it wouldn't change a thing. In chapter 8, it's like God says, "Okay, let me show you what an outpouring of wrath would look like." It's a nightmare! Like Scrooge's three ghosts, the plot moves relentlessly forward, a veritable onslaught of horror. No pastel colors here! The seven seals, trumpets, and bowls and their tragic plagues are part of the book's wake-up call to us.

The nightmare reaches a breaking point after the 6th trumpet. Revenge, whether it's physical or spoken violence, may feel right, but does it ever change anything? You would think it would change humanity's relationship to God or each other, but nothing is changed! No one has repented. In life, we never see anyone actually change through wrath and judgement. They are controlled by power for a bit, but it's not true justice because the change is not real. The message for victims of injustice is, "What you've just seen is not the kingdom of God, because it doesn't work."

God says "Stop" to the revenge fantasy.

### *Interrupted Judgement*

The stop occurs with the 7th and last trumpet in chapter 11. Just when we are expecting more violence, there is an interruption. It reminds us of the interruption in chapter 5, where the One worthy to open the scroll is revealed, and John sees not a fierce lion but a weak, slain lamb. (We'll learn more about this in Week 5's blogpost.)

Fast forward a few chapters, and instead of the last trumpet sounding with a full-out destruction of the world, a Voice comes and interrupts. God tells John not to write it down because it's not the message He wants to send. As is typical in the upside-down world of the Gospel, God wants to do something different. Space is created. John is given a bittersweet scroll to eat and told to prophesy again.

Like Scrooge, God's people are being given a second chance at a reformed life, and the horrifying visions just might shake them up enough to embrace it. The reason God has delayed in bringing down judgement is to provide space for his people to bear witness, to call for change to the world. After all, change, not revenge, is what God wants. It's not that plagues of wrath are inevitable, but they are ineffective.

Martin Luther King Jr. was someone who knew of the ineffectiveness of revenge. He said, "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting [promoting] the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it."

### *Authentic Witnesses*

The surprising turn in Revelation is that we don't have to be like the pre-reborn Scrooge, witnessing our dismal demise. Instead, we are to be engaged in speaking the truth, calling for change, calling on the world to honor the ways of the Creator who seeks life for the earth.

To show us a picture of what this would look like, chapter 11 first gives us a collage of prophets who had been authentic witnesses. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel — Revelation's first audience would have recognized these heroes of the faith immediately. It was as though John was urging them to remember, "Here, this is what authentic witness looks like. This is the pattern of life to which you are called. This hope is what the visions of Revelation have to offer you who are suffering."

When the 7th trumpet finally sounds, it marks not disaster but celebration, verses which inspired Handel to write the Messiah. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever." (Rev'n 11:15) The point of this part of Revelation is that God could pummel the earth, but instead, a space has been opened for us to see that God is calling for change, calling for us to honor the ways of the Creator who wants life, not death, for the earth. Empire has been overthrown and like Scrooge, we are called to a new life, bearing witness to the God of second chances.

In our humanness, we want revenge, and our anger is confrontative and violent, but the deeper desire of God is always to restore. Striking back is easy, but to come back with a more creative option, which really fits the context, is much more difficult.

The way of restoration doesn't come naturally to us. When Martin Luther King Jr. was urging the people to respond nonviolently to injustice, he had them rehearse the motions of what they'd do when confronted. Sit-ins, peaceful resistance and songs of "We Shall Overcome" became the enduring legacy of change.

The Creator seeks life for the earth and all its people, and to be God's witness means to seek not just peace, but justice as well, like the Hebrew word shalom. Shalom is not a simple peace, but a complete peace, which heals and mends the world, restoring of all creation.

Father Greg Boyle, the Catholic priest who gives jobs to ex-gang members through Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, often presides over funerals of kids who have died because of violence. Exemplifying the shalom of God, he sees all the gang members as God's children when he mourns, "It's kids I love killing kids I love." That's suffering love. As hard as it is for victims of injustice to accept, God loves the just and the unjust, and seeks shalom for us all.

Like the redeemed Scrooge, and the peaceful resisters of the Civil Rights Movement, Father Boyle would fit in the collage of witnesses of Revelation 11. Like Scrooge, we are called to a new life, bearing witness to the God of second chances.

#### Questions for engagement

- Who have you encountered who exemplifies the interrupted judgment and mercy of God?
- Have you ever received a wake-up call? Did it change you?
- When have you received forgiveness when you were expecting judgment?
- What spiritual practices interrupt the downward spirals of your "lesser angels"?
- What signs of hope do you see in your community?

### **You've Got Mail**

#### *The Message of Revelation*

Have you ever received something in the mail that looked important and simply stared at it for a while? It is hard to look at any important looking letter and not be insanely curious about what's inside. Sometimes, there is an unexpected check in that envelope that comes at just the opportune time...other times, it is a letter that tells you some bad news that you weren't expecting. To look for any length of time at an unopened letter is bound to be an emotional experience. The allure of an unopened letter attests to the power it can have to stir up hope or change things. It is this image that is alive in Revelation, chapter five. Just when we thought the story was over, someone has something more to say. Amid the randomness of daily events, we are offered coherence, making sense of our lives.

Revelation 5 offers one of the best "You've Got Mail" stories ever. The people were discouraged and in dire need of a good word. Whether faced with open hostility, subtle pressure to conform, or a poverty of faith, life made less sense all the time under the Empire. Like all oppressed people, they were crying out for an interpretive

word when the meaning of their lives felt hidden to them. God saw what was going on and sent them a word of hope.

It didn't arrive through Twitter, email or even snail mail. Letters in the first century came in the form of a scroll. Amid difficult circumstances, it would help make sense of their suffering and provide a way forward. It always seems like God is absent when trauma is acute, but the scroll's message eclipsed God's seeming absence, for it contained the mystery of God's intention for humanity.

### *The Mail Room*

Before the scroll is even delivered, John is summoned by a voice which said, "Come up here," and brought to an elaborate mail room. The United States Postal Service facilities could never match this place. John sees concentric circles, and in the very center is a majestic throne. Royal rooms like these are usually just for the elite, but this one is different, for everyone and everything is welcome. The king on the throne is also different, for his authority is centered on relationship not patriarchal power. God's presence has a radiant, gem-like splendor, and his power comes not in lording it over others, but through sacrifice.

In front of the throne is a crystal sea. With its background flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder, you'd think you were on a Hollywood movie set. Four strange and mysterious creatures have eyes everywhere, even under their wings. Twenty-four elders, leaders of the early Jewish/Christian communities, yield their own authority as they lay their crowns before the throne of God. They bow and declare that only God is worthy of honor and glory and power.

This scene could not be more different from the reality of the early Christians, or ours. We don't usually honor the messenger quite so elaborately! The elders in the vision were laying their crowns before God, the author of the scroll, but many in John's day were quietly ready to lay their crowns at the feet of imperial authority as they led complacent and accommodating lives. We lay down our crowns (or give our deepest authority) to our happiness projects and all the things we think are more important than God.

### *A Rightly-Ordered Universe*

In all this build-up, John wanted us all to see that there's another form of power. It's not just greater than that of the Empire but is different in kind. Here is a vision of a rightly-ordered universe with the Creator, not Caesar, at the center. Everything has splendor but nothing takes God's place.

The stage has been set for the scroll's delivery, and the anticipation is high, especially as there's writing on both sides and it's sealed with seven seals, which in John's day meant something of importance was inside.

### *Where's the Letter Opener?*

Have you ever had a dream where, perhaps in a scene as splendid as this, you receive "The Answer" to the meaning of life? Or perhaps the secret of life is shown to you? It feels tangibly real and just what you needed to hear and yet, when you wake up, it dribbles out your ear. You're simultaneously filled with incredible hope and deeply let down. The big message which still feels so real, is forever out of reach and we are left bereft, not understanding the meaning of our lives or the meaning of history. If we've felt desperate enough, we might begin to sob.

This might help us understand the next scene for, after all this buildup the highly anticipated scroll arrives but...no one is worthy enough to open the seals and read the message. The prophet begins to weep. Not just the meaning of life, but the meaning of the universe and all of history is in that letter, yet no one can break the seals and figure it out. Nothing seems left but the silence of God. The people are at the end of themselves and all hope is lost.

Or so it seems, for in Revelation, the story never ends with the bad news. If we keep turning the page, we see a new and startling word picture, a new twist in the plot. And so, it happens that an elder tells the weeping prophet that someone is worthy, and it's a lion.

When we hear someone being compared to a lion, we think of someone at the top of the food chain who will come and crush our enemies. We fill the word with all of our unfulfilled hopes for power and vindication and vengeance. The lion of Judah, that traditional image of power, will be the conquering hero who will break the seals and finally make sense of things.

### *Lamb Power*

But God fulfilled the prophecy in a way that our human minds never would, for when John turns to look, he is shocked. What he sees is not a marauding lion, but a live lamb that has been slaughtered. This is probably the most important and most surprising image of Revelation. Other ancient apocryphal writings from the ancient world had animals too, but they were mighty animals like eagles, lions and bears. Revelation is the only apocalypse with a lamb as its image of power. And the word used in scripture is the most diminutive form of lamb, like a little "lamby".

Nothing could be more opposite to a roaring lion than a little slain lamb, but John fuses the images together and subverts the meaning of lion power. This is certainly a different way of conquering! This seemingly weak animal, killed yet mysteriously still standing, is the one worthy to open the scroll. Vulnerability and sacrifice, not "might makes right," has won the day. In our community, we've come to call this "Lamb Power."

People knew that this lamb referred to Jesus Christ, the one who ruled not by domination but through sacrificing himself out of love. Like the lamb, he was slain, but also resurrected. This profoundly anti-violent hero who has the character of God is the one worthy to open the scroll.

### *All-Seeing and All-Knowing*

Imagine a letter written by someone who knows you better than you know yourself. Someone who sacrificed everything for your well-being. Not just that but someone who knows the meaning of all of history, where life is headed, what will happen, why things go wrong, why things go right, why there's suffering in the world...and has the power to change it all for the better.

Now imagine that the author of that letter was a weak lamb with seven eyes and seven horns. The irony and symbolism couldn't be richer. In scripture, seven is always the number of perfection. In its slaughtered state, it looks weak, but the seven horns signify its perfect power, and like the compound eyes of insects, the seven eyes epitomize its perfect and comprehensive sight.

This is an all-powerful, all-seeing lamb who fathoms us deeply. The love of God is evident in this slain lamb because even though it was subjected to the worst of human evil, it still forgives. The Lamb warns us that power is not of this world. Its all-seeing eyes know us and all of history at the deepest level.

This is an odd kind of power. The power we usually crave is lion-like; the type that forces our will on others, to defend ourselves and get our way. Our anger at situations we can't control is confrontative and violent, but God's deepest desire is always to restore us to ourselves.

This must have been a startling message for the people! To have the conquering lion depicted as a slain lamb totally redefines all our understanding of power and the nature of reality. We are witnessing the deepest truth about God.

### *Open the Letter Already!*

What this scroll ultimately says resonates through time and still speaks today, like a poem with eternal echoes. Its message takes up the rest of Revelation and involves the battle between good and evil. That message is as rich and multi-faceted as a jewel, and like impatient kids we might ask, “What does it say?” But Revelation is written in a way that says, “Hurry up and wait”. We’re given a letter and there’s a sense of urgency, but it takes 22 chapters to get there!

The answer is that the “what” is not nearly as important as the “Who”. If we know a letter is from someone who loves us utterly and has sacrificed everything for us, then whatever our friend says will be okay. We can lean into that relationship and keep listening.

The Lamb’s message has the power to change things for the good and ultimately fix our broken world. Things only make sense when seen through the eyes of sacrificial love. The all-powerful and all-seeing Lamb sees the meaning of our lives and all of history. Though it often looks like Love is losing, we can trust that the Lamb who sacrifices itself for our good will speak just the right word and always at the right moment.

It’s as though the message of the scroll is saying, “Your life is surrounded by God’s presence: past, present and future. God is with you in each dimension and enwraps all of the cosmos with God’s presence. God sees what’s in the scroll of all of life. Your scroll’s meaning is not hidden from God, not even what others consider bad or shameful. God can use everything, even weakness, for God’s glory.”

But these words are not static, with a once and for all meaning. They are a living document, or perhaps music, and become unique when applied to each context and to each life. Like the number seven, the permutations are eternal and infinite.

Despite all appearances to the contrary, this is what is real at the center of things. What our society portrays as real and what God shows us as real are different. We don’t understand the meaning of our lives, or the meaning of history. Our only hope lies in God cracking the code for us.

John is giving an alternate version of Empire and it’s so different from how we usually think of power. The worldly powers that be like to think they’re running things through fear and threats, but the scroll reminds us of who really owns the world. At the center is not a power that lords it over others. That kind of power never actually changes anyone. Love which suffers for the sake of others is what is worthy.

That’s a message worth waiting for. It’s a relationship worth entrusting our lives to.

### Questions for Engagement

- Have you ever received a letter that changed your life?
- What does a lifestyle of Lamb Power look like in our world today?
- If self-sacrifice is the true power of God, then how does it change who we are in the various contexts of our lives?
- Describe a time when you saw and understood things with greater depth. Was there a person or a situation that helped reveal the meaning to you?
- Why is it important to see Jesus as a slain lamb instead of a devouring lion?
- Imagine your life as surrounded by God’s presence: past, present and in the future, with you in each dimension. How has God been with you? What might God say in a letter addressed to you?

### **Revelation and Worship of the Really Real**

A number of years ago, I went on a training tour of several countries in Eastern Europe. The Berlin Wall had just come down and underground church leaders in several countries contacted a Youth and Children’s Ministry organization for which I had done some work and asked us to come to their turf and provide some training and teaching. One certain day stands out as a highlight, and in particular, one item of food.

The small group that was our training team had spent a full day walking around a Polish neighborhood. Though the weather was hot, and social awkwardness left me feeling a bit weird in this foreign setting, we enjoyed speaking to local vendors, to children and to a holy man at a centuries old Catholic cathedral who served sweet tea and spoke to us of his faith. At the end of the day, when I was spent and sweltering, my host gave me an orange.

To this day, I have not forgotten this orange. In contrast to my unfamiliar surroundings, its juicy, citrus sweetness was refreshing and while I know the orange was not a deity, my response felt akin to worship. I could not contain myself. It erased all barriers and transcended any temporal discomfort. This orange seemed more real than any orange I'd ever had, making me think what I'd eaten before was only a pale imitation. This is what oranges were intended to be; an "orange within the orange," or as a child might put it, "really real".

### *Seeing the World Differently*

This experience came to mind when considering the topic of worship in Revelation. John's descriptions of the seven visions he received are over the top and you get the sense he can't quite find the words either. As the Christians in Ephesus listened to Revelation read aloud in the worship service, they got a sense of another dimension of reality. Their eyes were opened to see the world differently.

Normally in their day to day world, everyone was urged and in fact commanded to worship the Emperor in vast ceremonies. Both imperial and local cult celebrations in John's day pulled out all the stops when it came to worshipping the rulers of the day, but the scenes in Revelation made them seem puny in comparison. The adoration the Lamb receives utterly surpasses anything the Empire came up with, making their ceremonies appear gaudy and a cheap replica of the real thing. Worship of the Emperor had its rituals but seeing the slaughtered-but-living Lamb was the real thing, a taste of the holy. And like my taste of the orange, it left them forever changed. Everything was different now.

Perhaps after hearing them, the world looked just a bit more touched by God, and their small worship services became more imbued with the state of awe inherent in John's visions. Revelation gave them, and gives us even now, eyes to see the whole world with a kind of sacramental vision.

### *World Within World*

In C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia series, a similar world is discovered at the end of their journey in The Last Battle. When the children reach the "New Narnia," they don't escape their homeland but instead go more deeply into God's picture. The new place is the same as the world they left behind, but everything is more radiant. It is "more like the real thing." New Narnia is "world within world," Lucy realizes. The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins sees this same radiance when he declares, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." This world beckons us like it did for the children of Narnia, "Come further up, come further in!"

In the seven scenes of worship in Revelation, we are invited to see God's presence everywhere in the world around us. Like the children in the New Narnia, the early Christians would have seen their same old world now charged with God's grandeur, as the poet said so eloquently. Their perception is fundamentally altered. For people whose literal world was filled with temptations to conform and oppression if they didn't, they needed to see this world.

### *Ultimate Concern*

Almost 2000 years later, we too need to see this new world, for much of the time, we are distracted by the false gods of our age and fooled about what has greatest value. In John's day, the Emperor was promoted as the real deal; worthy of all praise. Rome had a seductive propaganda and Christians were manipulated and wooed into the worship of the empire.

Long ago, Plato wrote about someone getting duped into thinking they knew what was real. In his famous story, prisoners are sitting in a cave, where they're chained and forced to face a wall. Behind them is a fire, and all day long, a parade of human life walks across a bridge, casting shadows on the wall in front of the prisoners. Because they've been chained there all their lives, they think the shadows are the real thing. But shadows are not the same as the "really real".

Plato was teaching his students that we are actually freed from our chains in the cave and freed to understand that the shadows are not real. We can apprehend what is real because there are no chains around our wrists and ankles.

Or are there? Even though we are free, much of the time we act like these prisoners. So much parades as a priority, begging our loyalty — money, looks, personal success, relationships, fun, travel, sports, security... The list is endless and some priorities, like justice, stewardship of the earth, or artistic expression, would even be considered spiritual.

Though none of these are wrong in themselves, the worship scenes in Revelation inspire us to embrace what theologian Paul Tillich once described as our "ultimate concern." We are grasped by it because it has moved us deeply and seems sacred, numinous or holy. People put their faith in it. What we really believe and value will shape the way we live, but we must be careful, for ultimate concerns have the capacity to heal as well as destroy a person.

The ultimate concern for the worshipping throngs in Revelation was the central hero, that slaughtered-but-living lamb who was actually a warrior king, the One who can and already has conquered every imperial pretender. This lamb, Jesus, not the powers that be, was worthy of worship.

In making Jesus their ultimate concern, the Christians would not worship the emperor and this was considered treason. Worship of the emperor could take place beside the local or national gods in John's day, but certainly not to the exclusion of the emperor. This kind of worship was subversive and explained why the Christian community in Revelation experienced oppression and even persecution. The worship in Revelation inherently condemned empire and all those who supported the empire's evil program.

*"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!"* (Revelation 4:2-11)

Of all the seven visions, what John sees in the throne room is said to be central to the entire book. Everything is anchored in this scene. "In heaven stood a throne."

Thrones are big in Revelation, mentioned time and again. To us a throne seems archaic, but in the ancient world it represented sovereignty and lordship. Whoever sat on it commanded ultimate concern. In this heavenly room, the majestic throne is at the center, surrounded by concentric circles. It wasn't just that God's crown had gems, but his whole presence had a radiant, gem-like splendor. The sea of glass (reminding us of a still, calm lake) comes from the molten glass that flows between the cherubim. It's a stilled sea, because God has calmed the chaos. That's why the 24 elders lay down their crowns, because God is in control of the chaos of the world.

As we noted above, the One at the center of this whole scene is not out to protect his own power. He is a sacrificer and his authority is not patriarchal or top-down, but relationship centered. This Ruler will do anything for the good of his subjects, even give his own life.

The Emperor could never have matched this scene. This heavenly Ruler is so much more transcendent than we can ever imagine. Every sentient being in the universe is surrounding God. This is reality. They all owe their love, their devotion, their worship, their very existence, to God. "Thou are worthy, to receive glory and honor and power," they sang. As he's writing it all down, John is probably thinking of Nero, or other Emperors, sitting

in their Empire, and he asks, “Who is more powerful?” It’s not Nero or Claudius. It’s the One who all sentient beings rest upon.

What, or rather who, was under the throne is just as important. Those who are suffering, and those who have died because of their faith, are sitting underneath the throne of God, crying out, “How long? How long?” That is, how long do we still have to suffer? The scroll, sealed with seven seals, hasn’t been opened yet and God reveals that He’s waiting so that grace can be manifest to as many as possible.

We don’t usually get big visions like this, or experience worship on such a grand scale. Much of the time, our experience can be dry or dull, or we get small hints and “see through a mirror dimly” as 1 Corinthians 13:12 says.

But when we read John’s descriptions, we begin to see our world differently. Each scene describes an encounter with what, or rather Who, is Real. We are called to renew our faith in the One who is truly in charge of the cosmos and all history. In this encounter with what is really real, we wonder why we ever settle for less when we gather to give God praise and thanksgiving.

Knowing that there is another dimension of reality from which our world originates, way deeper than surface appearances, helps our imagination. We can appreciate what we have and look forward to what will eventually be. The Psalmist writes of stars that sing, animals that praise, and trees that clap their hands in praise of God. As surrealistic as it sounds, this is the world we might have come from. This is the world we get echoes of when we are in a worshipful attitude. Just like my taste of the “orange within the orange,” there is also a “world within the world,” God’s world, which is the “really real” one, despite appearances to the contrary.

Every so often, when our hearts get caught in song, when someone’s compassion evokes our tenderness or when our anxious minds get stilled by a calm lake, we might see that the poet was right. The world really is charged with the grandeur of God when our eyes are opened as John’s were in the visions. As we imagine the Reality of this world with John, as we trust in this God, maybe we will go more deeply into God’s picture, like the Narnia children.

Lord knows we need this kind of worship, weighty and dense with meaning, redirecting our wayward hearts back to True North.

Questions for Engagement:

- Have you ever had an experience of the really real that left you in a state of awe?
- How is the worship portrayed in Revelation similar to or different from experiences of worship in churches today?
- Ancient Celts and later Christians had a term to describe times and places that are “really real”: thin places. Thin places happen when the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we are able to catch glimpses of the divine. Describe a thin place you have experienced.
- Think about experiences you’ve had of powerful worship. What made it work for you? What lasting impression has that experience had on you?

### **Debunking the Rapture**

#### *Introduction*

Many people, myself included, grew up in fear of the Rapture. After seeing the infamous movie “Thief in the Night” in the ’70’s, I was constantly terrified I’d arrive home to discover that everyone in my family had been suctioned up to heaven and I alone was left to face the tortures of the tribulation. “You’ve been left behind...” were the sad lyrics to a song we sang.



The modern book series *Left Behind* have fueled this fear, and the theology behind them is dangerous indeed. For starters, the word “rapture” is not even biblical, and the interpretation of the Bible on which these books are based is fiction. As Barbara R. Rossing (author of the excellent book *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*) put it, “God is coming to heal the world, not to kill millions of people. God loves the world, and God will never leave the world behind.”

A profound message of hope is at the heart of the entire Bible, not one of violence and “us vs. them”. People are looking for hope-filled ways to see the Bible and the world. “Love and healing — not Armageddon and war — are the messages people of faith must keep lifting up as God’s vision of the world,” writes Rossing.

This futuristic interpretation on the end times (sometimes called Dispensationalism) have given many a sense of false power, while leaving behind the fruits of the Spirit such as humility, wakefulness and trust.

There are two steps that will bear true fruits of inspiration and hope:

- 1) Wear the correct glasses when reading Revelation, the ones with a literary lens. This is apocalyptic literature. This is the view that is grounded in the Bible.
- 2) Understand that it was written in and for the first-century readers and interpret it from within their world, not ours.

This approach can make us people of faith.

*“Reading Revelation Again for the First Time” by Paul Patterson*

*Few in my boomer generation manage to escape the sixties without first being introduced to the likes of Bilbo, Frodo, the Dark Riders and Sam Gamgee. Tolkien’s fantasy, The Lord of the Rings, a few Dungeons and Dragon games, and a whole lot of illicit substances, were the cultural prerequisites for exiting adolescence.*

*It was at the end of this phase of life that I first encountered the book of Revelation and was utterly fascinated. Dragons and deep pits, a white-haired wizard redeemer, a flouncy lady in red dress and a manipulative magus were no strangers to me. While many sophisticated exegetes struggled to understand the book, I felt quite at home in its world. I loved the author’s use of metaphor as political critique and symbolic language as a way to mine meaning.*

*I am not alone in reading Revelation as prophetic fantasy. As I have studied the history of Revelation interpretation, I found that many if not most readers have been inspired by the images in the book as portents of their own or soon-to-be future histories. Groups such as the early church Montanists, medieval monastics, Reformation Anabaptists, Jehovah Witnesses and Seven Day Adventists, up to contemporary Evangelicals have read Revelation as prophetic allegory for their times. Analogies with their contemporary enemies have taken on the roles of Anti-Christ, Whore of Babylon, Babylon, the False Prophet as well as the Ten-Headed Dragon. Some Anti-Christ candidates have included: Caesar Nero, Pope, John F. Kennedy, and Henry Kissinger, right up to Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. When a reader becomes bored identifying characters, they can always play the pick your date game. Dates in the 1000s, 1400s, and especially in the 1900s have come and gone, and been replaced or spiritualized, but the constant calculation of the weeks of Daniel or the remaining days of planet earth go on.*

*The question I puzzle over is what sort of individuals and communities does all this deciphering and calculating form? Reading the Bible Again for the First Time suggests that one of the Bible’s chief tasks is to guide Christ’s followers into his image and to embody the first fruits of a new humanity*

*which all are invited to join. Along with Marcus Borg I have to ask, does the futurist interpretation accomplish this?*

*Looking back at the effects of biblical futurism on my life, I have to conclude that rather than being humble, wakeful and trusting, I drifted more to intellectual pride and sleepy complacency of being one of the elect, and paranoid or cynical about politics. My pride was stoked by the fact that as a very young believer due to my facility with teaching prophecy, I was asked to teach an adult Bible class. I basked in the admiration of those who would say how much I understood prophecy and explained it so clearly. I have to laugh when I consider that the first academic Christian theology I ever read was by Dwight J. Pentacost, *Things To Come*. That is quite a name for a pre-millennialist interpreter.*

*Sadly, I missed the effect this way of reading Revelation had on those who relied on it. Like those who sold up their goods and ran to the hills in the 19th century, one of my friends, disappointed in the delayed return of Christ in the 1970's, pitched his faith and resorted to the Egyptian Book of the Dead for solace. Instead of becoming aware of the tragedy of war in the Middle East, I delighted when events substantiated my theology, ignoring the terrible human cost on both sides of the battle. When political events got worse my heart leapt for joy since it indicated the closeness of the coming of God. The futurist millennial hope did not make me a better person or a Kingdom or global citizen. I became self-congratulating, ideologically blinkered and paranoid.*

*Not all who adapt or inherit this interpretation have these effects but many I encountered then and now did and do. More important than arguing the details of the futurist system I have come to see that Revelation can improve spirituality when interpreted as historically and metaphorically as Marcus Borg recommends. The first step toward such a reinterpretation of Revelation involves understanding what sort of literature it is. Reading Tolkien as a literary prophecy of the Second World War may be the equivalent of reading Revelation as a prediction of literal events two thousand years from its writing.*

*Revelation is as "apocalyptic" as Lord of the Rings is "fantasy and allegory." Apocalyptic has been called the literature of the dispossessed. It is for those living in times of deep persecution who are in need of assurance and comfort. That said, this literature can err in taking revenge of the enemy too far and seeking military empowerment to overcome their enemies, which suggests that apocalyptic has a dualistic black and white cast to it. The poor and the oppressed are utterly righteous and the rich and politically strong are utterly evil.*

*Revelation is however not only apocalyptic but prophetic in another way. It forth-tells or interprets justice like the prophets of old. Revelation is saying clearly that God will resolve domination by leadership and oppression of the poor. The precise manner of God's shalom-creating is found more accurately in the gospels than in Revelation. Revelation, however, does tell us that the tyrants of history are controlled by the Lamb and that he is worthy of praise. Praise, trust and confidence can be a product of reading Revelation historically and metaphorically.*

*A second step is to interpret the symbols of revelation within the first-century context looking for clues to their meaning in events, characters and artifacts that those living in the seven churches could understand. Revelation was written to and for them first. Without this emphasis we go much astray in reading the book. It is far more likely that the Antichrist is Caesar (Nero or Domitian) than he is any world leader in our time. It is more contextual to see the seven hills of the dragon's lair as Rome than the European Union. Babylon is more likely the dominator hierarchy of Rome than America or China. The point is the reader was asked to interpret the book from within their world.*

*Origin of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo saw in Revelation an allegory for moral and spiritual life. On the basis of the Revelation the people of God acknowledge God's sovereignty and learn to*

*praise in trustful hope. Marcus Borg agrees with them that the historical metaphorical method leads us to see Revelation as a book of inspiration and hope.*

*Reading Revelation again as metaphor does however have something in common with my Lord of the Rings approach. The cosmic battle myth that informs the story is deeply connected to our Judaic-Christian mono-myth found in many fantasy tales that assure us that there is strength in humble trust and the dragon is slain. To carry this helpful metaphor in our hearts is to make us people of faith not unlike Frodo, Bilbo and the many real-life saints who have suffered and overcome in the power of the Slain One, who is worthy of praise.*

### Questions for Engagement

- Paul and his friend were negatively affected by reading Revelation as though it were a roadmap for the future. Have you or someone you know been affected in a similar way?
- Since no particular Bible passage uses the word "Rapture," why do so many people believe that the Bible teaches that God will snatch Christians off the face of the earth?
- Revelation tells us that the scrolls of history are in the control of a vulnerable, sacrificed lamb rather than a force of violence or war. What does this reversal of roles say about power and victory?
- The Left Behind series has sold more than 65 million books, but a story of someone ruling by "Lamb power" would never be popular in the same way. Why does dispensationalist theology have such appeal today?
- What does a lifestyle of Lamb power look like in our world today? Have you seen God and the Lamb alive in the world?

### **The Tale of Two Kingdoms**

The news is often bewildering. Corrupt leaders wield harmful power, and we shake our heads. It makes no sense. Does no one else see through their veneer?

Political cartoons can provide welcome relief for our weary brains. They can make us laugh if we understand the meaning but more than that, they provide sharp and serious critique, making us rethink our assumptions about the way things are. Everyone is familiar with the current events behind the images, and the artist gives us a perspective to help us see the world in an unexpected way. Using the skills of irony, symbolism and exaggeration, a good cartoonist can change the opinions of people.

One recent image showed the face of an ostrich which also looked strikingly similar to a US presidential hopeful. "This person doesn't have power," the picture implied, for we all know how the ostrich buries its head in the sand, just as some leaders avoid what is true or real.

The word pictures in Revelation work in much the same way as political cartoons. John uses them to expose the shortcomings of first century society to the scrutiny of his readers, and his cartoons still apply all these years later. Using images like deranged beasts emerging from the sea and the land, John gets us to consider what happens when political structures become abusive. Then and now, he wants us to open our eyes to dangers we might not be aware of otherwise.

There is a particularly vivid word picture in chapters 17 & 18. It has inspired many an artist to paint it. John receives a vision in the wilderness of a woman riding on a beast from the sea. The reader would have known that the 7-headed beast represented Rome. The 7 heads would have reminded everyone of Rome's 7 kings and 7 mountains.

And now the image becomes layered with more implications when a woman is riding it. She's a harlot, wearing a sumptuous gown and the finest jewelry, displaying the ultimate in materialism. It's eye-catching but gaudy, over-the-top and even vulgar. The woman is Babylon the Great and if you google her, Wikipedia will tell you

her nickname is the Whore of Babylon. She's in a drunken stupor and there's a cup filled with sewage in her hand. She's drunk with the blood of the saints and Jesus' witnesses. This cartoon couldn't be more graphic and incisive. Imagine a supposedly great and proud city being portrayed in this way — greedy, blood-thirsty, drunk and violent. The picture is far from flattering!

The two features that stand out are Rome's conspicuous consumption and its violence. People would cheer for Nero or any other leader, but who can clap when the empire is actually a predatory beast with a drunken prostitute riding it? Readers oppressed by Rome's imperial corruption would have nodded in agreement. It may have looked powerful, but Rome was obsessed by its craving for luxury, and driven by the kind of violence exemplified by Nero's slaughter of many Christians. The ancient writings said it well. The Romans "plunder, butcher and steal and call that empire. They ravage and steal and call it peace."

This picture is the best of what a political cartoon does, for it makes its readers think. Just as the United States represents its highest ideals in the Statue of Liberty, Rome had the goddess Roma. To turn her into a garish whore would have shocked everyone. John wanted to startle his readers into seeing how seductive Rome's power was, personifying the "fatal attraction" of the powerful evil temptress. Though it looked alluring, it was actually repulsive and debased. Though it looks like Rome has power, the cartoon brings Rome down to size, exposing the corruption.

It's important to remember that just as Jesus is not a literal Lamb, we are not to read this word picture of the whore of Babylon literally. Rome was an empire, not a woman. It was an economic and political critique of Rome, not a critique of women.

By changing her name to Babylon, readers would have remembered the traits of a city with a notorious reputation and brutal conquests such as the destruction of Jerusalem 600 years earlier. It was an empire that was already fallen, and it was daring of John to call seemingly glorious Rome by this name. John uses the image of the harlot to portray the seamy side of his society. Even the woman is a victim of Babylon, for diabolical evil was behind her becoming who she was. Why would anyone want to conform to a society like that?

*Come out of her, my people!*

John is like a graffiti artist who scribbles all over a city everyone thinks is strong and virtuous. He's challenging people's perceptions, asking them to resist and choose something else. Don't be fooled! In one of the most poignant verses of Revelation, John warns his readers not to go with the flow and to live by different values. "Come out of her my people, so that you don't take part in her sins and don't receive any of her plagues!" (18:4)

For us, Babylon represents not just modern-day cities, but all the addictive attitudes and actions that can claim us. Like the harlot, we have often chosen to ride the beast but we are also victims of evil. The lustful energy to consume and possess can so quickly turn destructive and drive us to actions that are evil. It ends up victimizing us in some kind of chains. It's easy to think of sweat shops which enslave children or the cycles of poverty that create gangs, prostitutes and violence in our cities, but what about those dark corners of our hearts where we harbor unforgiveness, pride or anger? We commiserate with the Apostle Paul who lamented, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not do is what I keep on doing." (Romans 7:19)

The purpose of all apocalyptic journeys is to give us a wakeup call. As we saw in the terrifying visions Scrooge received, the disturbing images cause us to ask whether this what's going to happen, or what might happen? Why is John even showing us these images of corruption? Are we past hope?

Remember what was written earlier? That when things look grim, we are to "Keep turning the page". If John is asking the early Christians to leave Babylon, then there must be an alternative to its materialism and violence, but first it was crucial have our eyes opened. Remember the movie Wizard of Oz? The wizard holds many

empty promises to the travelers, but in the end, the curtain is pulled back to reveal a small, powerless man playing tricks.

In the same way, Revelation's horrific visions pull back the curtain and reveal the Roman empire for what it really is. In *The Rapture Exposed*, Barbara Rossing says, "It is not the great eternal power it claims to be, but a demonic beast that oppresses the world." Like the ancient Israelites leaving Egypt, we have to make another exodus away from what enslaves us. Led by the Lamb, we have to undertake a spiritual exodus out of the empire. We are given a new vision of how things truly are, and we are called to be faithful.

John saw the beginning of the way things truly are in the first of his apocalyptic journeys in chapters 4 & 5, where he travels up to heaven and sees a beautiful vision of God's throne. As we've already learned, despite appearances on earth, the throne room holds the true power behind the universe.

### *Alternative to Babylon: The Second City*

At the end of Revelation, John shows us a breathtaking vision of another city, an alternative to Babylon — God's wonderful paradise-like world called the New Jerusalem, descending from heaven like a bride, inviting us in. As it says in Philippians 3:20, we are citizens of this holy city. It's the one we are called to hope for.

The early Christians heard in John's vision that there is here on earth a community that is an alternative to empire. They come together to worship around a radical and transforming vision of the joyful reign of God in a city called the New Jerusalem. The gates there are never closed. They stand open 24/7 and everyone is invited in. It's packed not just with Jews and Christians, but with everyone. The 7-headed beast is completely opposite from the Lamb and they have utterly different kinds of power. True, both were slain, and both went on to live, but the crucial difference is that the Lamb rises from the dead to give life to others, whereas the beast rises from the dead to inflict death on others.

We are called to follow the Lamb, not the seductive powers that only enslave us in the end. The redeeming quality of the Lamb's self-sacrifice was completely unlike the pretensions of Rome or any other power.

This is truly a tale of two kingdoms and John in Revelation is asking for our allegiance. We're at a fork in the road. Where is your heart? Which way are you facing? Listen deeply to your conscience.

### Questions for engagement — Week 8

- What does an alternative way look like?
- Can you think of real life modern situations, whether in real life or in movies or literature, which have been destroyed by corruption?
- We usually think evil looks evil and is easily identifiable and avoidable, but the image of the harlot tells us that it can look good on the surface. Can you think of seemingly good things that can enslave us in the end?
- What does it look like for God's people to "come out of empire"? To live differently right where you are in the midst of our complex world? To live as if we are already claimed by God, modeling a different way of life? What example comes to mind from your community's life?

### **The New Jerusalem**

*"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."* Revelation 21:2

Our course and its vision have come to an end. What a spectacular end it is. In chapters 21 & 22, John receives a vision of the New Jerusalem, the Holy City of God. It's where the whole book has been leading us. We've

already learned about the evil city of Babylon in chapters 17 & 18, a metaphor for the Roman Empire. Now, a new heaven and a new earth are revealed.

I don't know about you, but the whole idea of "heaven" seemed a bit remote to me as a child. Preachers and Sunday School teachers described pearly gates and golden streets, but the concept never appealed to me. The idea of "no more tears" seemed like a good plan, but when I heard it was for eternity, my childhood imagination recoiled at what I thought meant a never-ending Sunday in the clouds, filled with church services, mandatory choir practice and for relaxation, a quiet household with napping adults. No thanks!

### *The Challenge of the Trivial*

I daresay I am not alone in imagining heaven as banal and uninviting. When we encountered the spectacular final visions, one scholar is quick to call our challenge to make sense of it the "Challenge of the Trivial." What he meant was that the vision of the New Jerusalem has been so trivialized in popular culture that it's not always easy to truly see its power and edge. The pictures are entertaining but not exactly something on which you'd want to stake your future. We need a vision that will stir the heart and honor the mind. Like a "Magic Eye" image, it's important to keep looking for the true picture, for the vision of the New Jerusalem goes far beyond any stereotypes.

Some might not have an other-worldly view of the New Jerusalem such as this. Reading that it's a New Heaven and a New Earth, some have been led to think that the old earth has to be destroyed so that God can create a brand-new earth, like taking the car to the junk yard and getting a new car. They hope for example that a new, glorious temple will be established in Jerusalem.

### *A Renewed Earth*

But the Greek word for "new" is not like that, nor are John's visions to be taken literally. It's more like a "renewal." Instead of a ruined earth, a renewed one right in the middle of this world is revealed. John would have welcomed this vision, since his home city of Jerusalem had been razed by war after the Jewish revolt against Roman domination. Most of John's community was poor, beset by troubles, with very little to hope for, and no doubt John's visions would have seemed like good news indeed.

No doubt Malala Yousafzai would understand John's hope for a renewed city. In her memoir *I Am Malala*, she writes of growing up in the town of Mingora, in the beautiful Swat Valley of Pakistan. It was a paradise which Queen Elizabeth once described as the "Switzerland of the east," yet became ravaged by the Taliban in Malala's lifetime. Now, years later, Malala is living in exile in England and longs for the day when she can return to a renewed paradise.

While not many of us have experienced exile and war, we can all relate to this hope since there are many kinds of wars which leave broken lives in their wake. There is not a corner of this earth, or our hearts, that doesn't need transformation.

Imagine all of us broken people suddenly seeing an amazing vision, not of a heaven we need to ascend to, but of a holy city that descends, renewing all it touches. Complete with the throne of God from Revelation 5, it moves from heaven down to earth and brings about massive changes to the very structure of the world. Previous to this, the throne room had been in heaven, but there is no more mention of heaven in Revelation after this point because it's moved to earth. It's not a static, dull idea of heaven, nor is it "pie in the sky when we die". Instead, it's a compelling vision of how God comes to dwell with us on this earth.

It's the culminating vision of the book — the picture of our life together on earth in a renewed world, a vision which we live in our lives right now. Unlike the dull, conventional images, it extends a vibrant word of hope to us all. Like the bejeweled Emerald City from the Wizard of Oz, it is a welcome relief for all weary travelers.

## *All Are Welcome*

It is also an inclusive place, packed with everyone who has experienced the power of God's grace. It has 12 gates, but they're never closed. It's a city of welcome for all who have been in exile. It's a vision of a rightly ordered creation, the way things were intended to be. It's so inviting that we want nothing more than to be one of its citizens.

The New Jerusalem has no need for a sanctuary because every corner is filled with God's presence. There's no false light here, or false charms. No shadows are cast because God's presence is filling the whole place, but it's a very different kind of presence where God reigns. Usually the word "reign" has negative connotations because people don't like being told what to do. However, this reign doesn't mean domination but a participation and partnership in God's healing of the world. As a living symbol of this healing, in the very center of the city is the river of the water of life which flows out from the throne of God. The trees on either side of the river bear leaves that are for the healing of the nations.

Revelation extends a vibrant word of hope to people in this vision, but it's important that we don't miss how huge this is. It touches on every dimension of life — social, political, sacred and even cosmic.

## *City City*

For the first century Roman reader, civic pride happened all the time. On the surface, Rome was a city of glory, the height of grandeur. It was the "place to be". But in reality, that image was false. Revelation's visions pulled back the curtain and depicted Rome as the "whore of Babylon". On first meeting, the pleasure and profit she offers might be seductive, but her charms would take you down and destroy you.

In many ways, these two cities, Babylon and the New Jerusalem, are mirror opposite. Where the city of New Jerusalem is the chaste bride of Christ, Babylon (Rome) was pictured whoring around with the kings of the earth. Where the city of New Jerusalem is full of the splendor of the glory of God, Babylon's splendor comes from exploitation. New Jerusalem's wealth comes from gratitude and generosity, but Babylon's wealth comes from extortion and stealing. The wine in Babylon makes the nations drunk and self-absorbed, but the water and tree of life in the New Jerusalem are for the healing of the nations. John's vision implores the people to come out of evil Babylon, but a "numberless number" of people are invited to enter the New Jerusalem. Unlike the degraded life in Babylon, life in the holy city is characterized by faithfulness, just as God's commitment was at the heart of the covenant in the days of the Old Testament prophets.

## *Already/Not Yet...and Something In Between*

These are the first two cities. One, Babylon, is already here. We see its destruction in the news every day, where exploitation, injustice, fear and exclusion cause a less than vibrant life in every city. The other city, the New Jerusalem, is a place to hope, anticipate and long for but it is not yet here, and too often seems a long way off. We live in a time in between Babylon and the New Jerusalem, living with the tensions dragging us in both directions in the gap between the already and the not yet. We live in a world of sin and yet yearn for a world of perfection at the same time. In some ways you could describe our lives by saying we live "between the two trees"...life between two trees is hard, but we are never alone. The Bible begins with the tree of life in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3) and ends with the tree of life in the new Jerusalem (Revelation 22), but the true tree of life stands in the center of the Bible calling us, guiding us, transforming us: the cross of Calvary. The true tree of life suspended between heaven and earth that loudly proclaims, "You are not alone...and your suffering is not the end of the story." For the fruit of the cross is not found on the tree between two trees, but in its fruit found in the empty tomb. Found in the resurrection. And the same is true with you. For the God of pursuit finds us united to Death, addicted to haste, and wounded by sins done to us and by us. And patiently, tendering he calls us to healing. He shines His brilliant light into the darkness of Death and offers us a resurrection. Not just in the future, but today. Transformation in Christ today.

### *A Foretaste of the New Jerusalem*

While some people can be resistant to studying this strange book, our study of Revelation can change us for the better. Its images can roll faithfully through our collective hearts and minds, and as the Spirit leads, can lodge there permanently. No matter what scripture we're soaking in, we can always reference back to Revelation's beautiful, disturbing, faith-filled visions. Its themes are perennial. Whether it's the warnings not to conform to Babylon's way of power, the encouragement to trust that the seven eyed Lamb sees our every situation or the nudge to rely on lamb-like sacrificial power in all we do, Revelation can form us and encourage our faith.