

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True. . .

Rev. 19:11

There is probably no book in the Bible which has received more attention than Revelation. It is safe to say that more commentaries have been written on this book than any other, yet few of them have been widely read. The American church in the past century has devoted enormous attention to Revelation and its study, yet few believers actually take the time to read John's letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

Revelation is the only book in the Bible which promises a blessing on those who read it aloud (1:3), yet which of us has ever heard the letter read in either a corporate or a private setting? Furthermore, if one were to hear the plain reading of Revelation, he or she would probably be simultaneously fascinated, bored and perplexed. The listener would be fascinated with the rich and exuberant imagery, bored because the symbols seem inaccessible and perplexed because of the depth of John's word pictures.

In John's 404 verses which comprise the book, we read of dragons, bowls of wrath, beasts, Babylon, lamps of fire, four horsemen, living creatures, a white stone, two witnesses, a woman clothed with the sun, a lake of fire and the city of God! Et cetera!

What do we do with all of this? What are we to do with Revelation? Why add still another study of this book to the plethora of available commentaries and study guides? How are we as a church in Santa Barbara, at the beginning of the third millennium, to make sense of this somewhat personal letter to seven churches in Asia Minor? More important, what does John's revelation have to teach us with regard to the living of our Christian lives in our time and place? The words of William Hendrickson are an appropriate beginning to our study. We would do well to turn to them each time we are tempted to become bogged down in the details of John's book.

Beautiful beyond description is the last book of the Bible. Beautiful in form, in symbolism, in purpose, and in meaning. Where in literature do we find anything that excels the majestic description of the Son of Man walking in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, Rev. 1:12-20? Where in Scripture do we find a more vivid and picturesque portrayal of the Christ, Faithful and True, going forth unto victory, seated upon a white horse, arrayed with a garment sprinkled with blood, followed by the armies of heaven, Rev. 19:11-16? Where again, do we find a sharper contrast than that between the doom of Babylon, on the one hand, and the

felicity of Jerusalem the Golden, on the other, Rev. 18, 19; 21, 22? And where are the Throne set in heaven and the blessedness of heavenly life depicted in a manner more serenely simple, yet beautiful in its very simplicity, Rev. 4:2—5:14; 7:13-17? What a wealth of comfort; what an insight into the future; above all, what an unveiling of the love of God is contained in the words of the prophecy of this book! (Hendrickson, p. 11)

How are we to interpret this “majestic” book? One commentator points out, “It is difficult to say what anything means until one has decided in a sense what everything means.” (Mounce, p. 12) Interpretations of Revelation vary greatly. Broadly speaking, there are four general approaches to the book.

1. The “preterist” understands Revelation to be a veiled description of the events of John’s own time. Revelation describes the persecution of Christians by Roman authorities in cryptic language while offering comfort to believers who suffer. The “prophetic” element of the book was fulfilled during the first century.
2. “Historicists” see in Revelation a broad description of the entire history of the church. These interpreters see John’s prophecy spanning the church age. The reader is taken from John’s day to the day of God’s victory, the day when the Holy City descends from heaven and God’s reign is consummated.
3. “Futurists” understand the visions from 4:1 to the end of the letter to be primarily a prophecy of the end of history. These interpreters usually find in Revelation references to current events in their own time.
4. The “idealist” sees Revelation as a broad affirmation of God’s victory over sin, of His judgment over evil and as the assurance that deliverance for the persecuted is forthcoming.

Most agree that there is a some truth in each understanding of the book. These approaches are not mutually exclusive. To emphasize one of these views to the exclusion of the others would be to force the book into a mold to which it refuses to conform. Yet, obviously, one must give weight to one school of interpretation over the others. The perspective of this study guide will emphasize, but not be limited by, an idealist understanding of Revelation. Certainly we find in these pages a sure prediction of the end, of the second advent of our Lord. But, as far as this writer sees it, we would be mistaken to push our understanding of John’s prophecy too far. John is concerned with the glory of God, not the Middle Eastern oil crisis, NATO, the Y2K problem, the breakup of Yugoslavia, etc.

Ultimately Revelation is a book about God. These twenty-two chapters assure the reader that God is in control and that worship is his due. Alan Johnson’s comment is pertinent.

Revelation may . . . be viewed, on the one hand, as an extended commentary on Paul’s statement in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and

blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of the dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” On the other hand, it also reveals the final judgment upon evil and the consummation of God’s kingdom in time and eternity. (Johnson, pp. 410-411)

Therefore, to try to “find” the Soviet Union or the role of America during the great tribulation, to try to discover Saddam Hussein, Slobodon Milosevic, James Dobson and Steve Jolley (the two witnesses of Rev. 11?) is a misplaced effort. This kind of search in these pages will only detract from John’s lofty subject matter. Eugene Peterson lends insight:

If the Revelation is not read as a poem, it is simply incomprehensible. The inability (or refusal) to deal with St. John, the poet, is responsible for most of the misreading, misinterpretation, and misuse of the book. . . . We do not have more information after we read a poem, we have more experience. (Peterson, p. 5)¹

Rightly understood, our study of Revelation will lead not to speculative arguments about the last days of history, but to a deep love for and adoration of God. All interpreters of John’s letter agree that the dominant theme is the sovereignty of God over history. In the end, our God will reign and we will worship Him with gladness.

As we approach Revelation we should bear in mind eight characteristics of the book.

First, Revelation is *a letter* written to the churches of Asia Minor. The entire book is addressed to the seven churches (1:4)² while chapters 2-3 contain specific letters to seven specific churches.

¹ Sir William Ramsay writes, “The most dangerous kind of error that can be made about the Apocalypse is to regard it as a literal statement and prediction of events. Thus, for example, 18:1—19:21 is not to be taken as a prophecy of the manner in which, or the time at which, the downfall of the great empire and of the great city was to be accomplished. It is not to be understood as foreshadowing the papacy, according to the foolish imaginings, ‘hollow and deceptive philosophy’ as St. Paul would have called them (Col 2:8) of one modern school. It is not to be tortured by extremists on any side into conformity with their pet hatreds. Those are all idle fancies, which do harm to no one except those who waste their intellect on them.” (Ramsay, p. 80)

² Ramsay points out that these seven churches are situated on a circular route “which starts from Ephesus, goes round what may be called *Asia par excellence*, the most educated and wealthy and historically preeminent part of the province.” (Ramsay, pp. 137-137) In other words, John is writing to all the churches in Asia Minor and uses these seven as representative of the whole.

Second, Revelation is *personal*. John knows the history of the various cities in which the churches dwell. He knows about their architecture, physical geography and cultural accomplishments. John also knows of the strength and weakness of the various churches. Most of the seven letters contain both a commendation and a condemnation. All contain a specific word of correction, a call to faithfulness and a promise. Each letter reveals something specific about Jesus.

Third, Revelation is *authoritative*. Should we say the book was written by John or by Jesus (cf. 1:1ff.)? Ramsay notes the “unlimited and unhesitating authority which inspires” the seven letters. This British archeologist notes that there is no parallel in other early Christian letters. (Ramsay, p. 54) A. L. Maycock writes, “No book in the Scriptures opens in such solemn terms; none makes so uncompromising a statement of its own direct inspiration.”¹

Fourth, Revelation is *apocalyptic* in tone. We read Revelation and find ourselves thinking, “What is this!!!???” First-century readers, however, were accustomed to reading literature which was similar to what we find in the last book of the Bible. Writers of apocalyptic² literature understood the world to be in a hopeless predicament. Only God’s direct intervention would suffice to make things better. Bizarre symbolism was employed in these writings (monsters, dragons, stars, demons, bowls of wrath, etc.) to make the point that God’s intervention was close at hand.

Fifth, John’s book is *biblical*. Students of Revelation differ on the exact number, but all agree that these pages are steeped in allusions to the Old Testament. Most find about 300 allusions to Old Testament passages. Peterson finds 518, but notes there is not one direct Old Testament quotation. John’s favorite books seem to be Exodus, Ezekiel, Daniel, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah and Hezekiah. Accordingly, the best interpretations of Revelation will be saturated in the teaching of the Old Testament.

Sixth, Revelation is *prophetic*. It would be difficult to read John’s book without the clear sense that he is giving the reader a prophecy, however vague or specific, of the end. God will triumph over evil. God will rule and reign with his people forever. No other reading of the text will do justice to this book.

Seventh, Revelation is *practical*. One commentator writes, “[I]f the Book of Revelation is a hard book to understand, it is also a hard book to put down.” Rightly read and understood, John’s apocalypse will lift us into the very presence of God. Revelation

¹ cited in Wilcock, p. 23.

² “Apocalyptic” comes from a Greek word which means “unveiling.” The first word of Revelation, in Greek, is *apocalupsis*.

encourages discipleship while warning against spiritual lethargy. John's black and white portrayal of saints and sinners is startling. The twenty-two chapters of this book point out, clearly, that every individual is headed for either God's wrath or for God's pleasure.

Eighth, the key to Revelation is *worship*. It is not too much to say that John's entire book is structured around seven worship services. His vision begins as he worships *in the Spirit on the Lord's day* (1:10). Seven times we find the scene in heaven is focused on the worship of God (Rev. 4-5; 7:9-17; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 15:1-4; 19:1-10; 21-22). Notice that in each of these worship services, save one, we are given the songs of the worshippers! The specific content of this heavenly worship of God should and will inform our worship as we study this wonder-producing letter!

When all is said and done, Revelation is a book of blessing. John weaves seven "beatitudes" into his vision, seven blessings on those who "hear" the words of this prophecy (cf. 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). May we be blessed by God as we ponder this last book of the Bible!

“See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

Revelation 22:7

Study One

The Transforming Vision

Revelation 1:1-20

Late in the seventeenth century John Owen wrote his greatest volume titled, Meditations on the Glory of Christ. The book was published shortly before he died. A friend, John Payne, came to Owen and announced that the book was being pressed. The Puritan preacher and author responded from his deathbed,

I am glad to hear it, but O brother Payne!
The long wished for day is come at last, in
which I shall see that glory in another
manner than I have ever done, or was
capable of doing, in this world.

The book in the presses contained the following words about the importance of the believer's meditation on the glory of Christ:

Only a sight of his glory, and nothing else, will truly satisfy God's people. The hearts of believers are like a magnetized needle which cannot rest until it is pointing north. So also, a believer, magnetized by the love of Christ, will always be restless until he or she comes to Christ and beholds his glory.

We can now lay down a great foundational truth: One of the greatest privileges the believer has, both in this world and for eternity, is to behold the glory of Christ.¹

As we open the book of Revelation the Apostle John has a vision of Christ in his glory. Read these verses, interact with the pages of this study guide, but more important, allow John's vision to become your own. Meditate upon the glory of your savior.

Read Revelation 1:1-20. Don't try to make sense of every detail. Read carefully (perhaps aloud). Make a list of what stands out during your first reading. What questions come to mind as you delve into John's Apocalypse? Be prepared to share your list with your homegroup.

¹ The Glory of Christ (abridged by R. K. Law), by, John Owen (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), p. 10.

The first word in the Greek text of this book is *apocalypse* which means “unveiling” or revelation. At the outset, note that the revelation belongs to Jesus and is about Jesus. The preposition “of” carries a double meaning which should guide the rest of our study in this book.

The Revelation is nothing if not focused on Jesus Christ. It is difficult to sustain this focus. There are so many fascinating symbols to pursue and so many intriguing subjects to take up that only a highly disciplined imagination holds everything in subordination to Jesus Christ. But it is the only way the Revelation can be read sanely. (Peterson, p. 27)

As we look into “bowls of wrath,” one hundred pound hail stones, heavenly trumpets and the like, let us remember the opening words of John’s letter. The book is about Jesus. Let us, in our homegroups and in our own study, sustain this focus.

Look at 1:1 carefully. Note the five-fold progression of the revelation. It is from the Father to Jesus, sent by an angel to John and then recorded and sent to the seven churches. The point is that John did not make up this book. It bears the authority of God himself!

Read 1:9 carefully. In what three ways does John identify with his readers?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The book we call Revelation was written out of a particular context. The Apostle John is a prisoner on the island of Patmos (1:9) which lies about 30 miles off the coast of Asia Minor. Patmos was a bitter place to live. The rocky island is about 10 miles long and 6 miles wide. Rome used the island’s rock quarry as a means to punish prisoners. As a denizen of Patmos John would have lost his rights, his property and his liberty. His sentence would normally have been for life.¹

¹ Eusebius tells us that John did, eventually, get off of the island and return to Ephesus in his old age (*Hist. Eccl. iii. 20.9*).

John was writing to a particular context: seven churches in Asia Minor who were tempted to capitulate to emperor worship. Emperor Domitian was the first governor of Rome to compel Christians to take part in Caesar worship.

Toward the close of his reign he became so overweeningly proud and arrogant that he demanded people to address him as “our lord and god” (*dominus et deus noster*). (Metzger, p. 16)

The pagans of these seven cities had no difficulty incorporating Caesar worship into their already syncretistic (mixed) religious practice. Adding another god to the list was quite acceptable. But the church had been founded on the notion that there was only one God who revealed himself in the person of Jesus! But think how great the temptation must have been. “Bow to Caesar? Why not? Everyone is doing it. I don’t even have to mean it. . . and paying such homage to my emperor might save my life.”

Think through this chapter with these things in mind. The whole chapter points to the supremacy of Christ. Persecution is real, but Jesus reigns supreme.

Notes and Questions:

1:4 What does John mean by *the seven spirits who are before his throne*? Perhaps this is John’s way of describing the fullness of the Holy Spirit (seven is the number of completion in Revelation). Or, the phrase may be pointing to the presence of the Holy Spirit in each of the seven churches. Mounce sees the “enigmatic” phrase as a reference to a “heavenly entourage that has a special ministry in connection with the Lamb.” (Mounce, p. 70) We can certainly applaud one commentator who writes,

We cannot know for sure. But we are duly warned that for some of the locked doors of Revelation, keys may be hard to find. (Wilcock, p. 35)

Indeed, we will find many “keyless” locked doors in the study before us.

Look closely at vss. 5 and 6. What nouns and verbs does John use to describe Jesus?

Nouns

Verbs

1:7 borrows from the prophets Daniel and Zechariah. Daniel prophesied that one “like a son of man, [will come] with the clouds of heaven (Dan 7:13).” Zechariah 12:10 sees the Day of the Lord as a time when the “inhabitants of Jerusalem” would look to “the one they have pierced” and mourn. By combining these images John alludes to the coming judgment of Christ. Why would he begin his book in this way?

1:8 portrays Jesus as both “already here” and “still coming.” How do both of these perspectives characterize your hope as a believer?

1:11 personalizes Revelation. This is a letter from Jesus to the churches of Asia Minor. How would you have felt to be one of the original listeners to the reading of this letter?

How should this very personal nature of Revelation inform our reading and study of Revelation?

1:12-16 Examine the vision John has of Jesus in these verses. Try to picture this vision in your own imagination. Make your own drawing of Jesus as you read. Before reading the texts below make a note of how the imagery of John’s picture strikes you.

The Jesus of Revelation 1 is steeped in the Old Testament. Notice the similarities to Daniel 10:5-6:

I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude.

Consider the following Old Testament passages in light of John's description of his vision of Jesus. How do these verses inform our reading of Revelation 1:12-16?

- Exodus 28:4; 39:29
- Daniel 7:9-13
- Isaiah 6:1-8
- Isaiah 49:2
- Ezekiel 43:2

One commentator warns against trying to unpack these images of Jesus too thoroughly.

. . . [T]o compile such a catalogue is to unweave the rainbow. John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. . . . His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing. (Caird, p. 25)

Metzger's comment lends insight into this vision and into the rest of the book of Revelation.

Instead of taking John's account with flat-footed literalism, we should imaginatively allow ourselves to be guided by the poetic quality of the narrative. We trivialize the account if we make a composite picture of the heavenly Christ showing each of these features literalistically. . . . John's description of the heavenly Christ does not mean what it says; it means what it means. (Metzger, p. 27)

What is John's response to his glimpse of the glorified Christ? Notice how this is in concert with other portions of Scripture which record what happens when one comes into close proximity with the glory of God.

- Joshua 5:13-15
- Daniel 10:15-16
- Matthew 17:6
- Acts 26:14

John *falls as though dead* before the glorified Christ. What has the glory of Christ done to you? John was rattled to the core as he was worshipping on the Lord's day. What is your experience of Christ in worship?

Read the following statement by Eugene Peterson on the flaming eyes of Christ. How has your vision of Christ, however strong or feeble, transformed your life?

Fire penetrates and transforms. Holiness gets inside us and when it gets inside us it changes us. Christ's gaze penetrates and purifies. He doesn't look at us, he looks *into* us. We are not a spectacle to Christ, we are invaded by him. (Peterson, p. 34)

Read 1:17-20. How does Jesus assure the very frightened apostle? How does Jesus describe himself?

What two images in verse 20 does Jesus interpret for John (and for us)?

When Jesus says *Don't be afraid, I am the first and the last*, John would surely have recalled Isaiah 44:6.

This is what the LORD says — Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.¹

It is the sovereign God himself who says "Fear not."

How should this command have offered comfort to the original readers of Revelation?
How does it offer comfort to you?

Sermon Notes. . .

¹ see also Isaiah 48:12.

Study Two

Ephesus: The Loveless Mega-Church

Revelation 2:1-7

Reading through the New Testament one cannot miss the prominence of the church in God's plan of salvation. Jesus, at the turning point of his ministry, declares to Peter that His plan is to build a church (Matt. 16:18). After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends and the church is born (Acts 2). As we read through Luke's book of Acts we find God adding people "to the church" as they are saved from their sin. Paul could not be more exuberant in his commentary on the church in God's plan. Read the following verses carefully.

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1:20-23

The church is the instrument through which God makes his wisdom known.

. . . through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

Eph. 3:10

With these truths before us it is safe to surmise that the church is a close-to-perfect institution. The Bride of Christ must be nearly spotless. The "Body" of Christ must be the spiritual equivalent of a perfectly trim weight lifter.

Think again.

We expect a disciplined army of committed men and women who courageously lay siege to the worldly powers; instead we find some people who are more concerned with getting rid of the crabgrass in their lawns. We expect a community of saints who are mature in the virtues of love and mercy, and find ourselves working on a church supper where there is more gossip than there are casseroles. We expect to meet minds that are informed and shaped by the great truths and rhythms of scripture, and find persons whose intellectual energy is barely sufficient to get them from the comics to the sports page. (Peterson, p. 55)

The seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3) prove this point. The church is not heaven. Neither is it the New Jerusalem. The church is comprised of stumbling saints, forgiven sinners and imperfect penitents. In the church we find the gossip and the God-centered, the spiritual warrior and the spiritually weak, the passionate and the passive.

There is a pattern in these letters.

During the next seven weeks fill in the following chart. Make a habit of referring to this chart as a home group as the weeks transpire. We want to learn what SBCC should emphasize and de-emphasize as we study these chapters.

Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor							
	Ephesus	Smyrna	Pergamum	Thyatira	Sardis	Phila- delphia	Laodicea
Description/Character of Christ							
Description/Character of Church							
Comment							

-dation							
Condemnation							
Correction							
Call							
Challenge							

The Letter to Ephesus

Read Revelation 2:1-7 from as many translations as you have available. Fill in the chart above for the Ephesian church.

It is fitting that John (or Jesus) would begin with the Ephesian church. While Pergamum was the capital of this Roman province, Ephesus was unsurpassed in importance. The city had about 250,000 residents during John’s time. The cosmopolitan center was beautiful physically and architecturally. It was set near the Aegean Sea and was the intersection of three major trade routes. Ephesus was the home of the temple of Diana, the mother goddess of all the gods.¹ This temple occupied the area of two soccer fields. One hundred columns, fifty-five feet high, held up the temple itself. The temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Ephesus also had an amphitheater which sat 45,000 people (see Acts 19:26ff.).

If the city was special, the church-community was spectacular. The gospel was preached and warmly received. The church grew by leaps and bounds. The leadership of the

¹ Diana is the Roman name for this goddess, Artemis is the Greek name (see Acts 19:28).

church was unsurpassed. Paul taught daily in Ephesus for over two years (Acts 19:9), Apollos was a teacher in the church, Priscilla and Aquila were on the pastoral team as was Timothy, Paul's protégé. Eusebius tells us that John went to live in Ephesus after his imprisonment on Patmos. Clearly the Ephesian church was blessed with able leaders.

Notes and Questions:

Each of the seven letters will be addressed to an *angel*. What is in mind here? Three views are popular. Which seems most favorable to you?

1. The letters are, indeed, addressed to a guardian angel who keeps watch over the local church.
2. Since the word angel means "messenger," this is John's way of addressing the "pastor" or "bishop" of each church.
3. Angel refers to "the prevailing spirit of the church." (Mounce, p. 85).

2:1b is easily interpreted by looking up the page just one verse to Revelation 1:20.

2:2 Evaluate Santa Barbara Community Church with regard to this commendation. Would Jesus give similar compliments to our body of believers?

The church is praised for her ability to discern false teachers (2:2b). Because Ephesus was a seaside cosmopolitan center at the intersection of three trade routes, traveling preachers would pass through this city on their way to Rome. They would, perhaps, speak to the Ephesian church. What do you think happened?

What place is there in the church of our era for testing the message of those who claim to be sent (apostle means "sent") by God? Does Santa Barbara Community Church do a good job of this? In what ways are we testing the message of those who claim to be apostles?

2:4 is startling. This first-century mega-church had grown loveless. J.B. Phillips paraphrases,

You do not love as you did at first.

Consider the following questions:

How serious is the charge? Compare the following:

- Matthew 22:37-39
- John 13:34-35

What does Jesus mean by the charge?

Is it the church's love for Christ which is absent?

Has the church grown cold in her horizontal love one to another?

Has the church lost her love for the world into which it was sent?

How does a church become loveless? Consider Ephesians 1:15. What happened?
What are the possible causes of Ephesian lovelessness?

Evaluate Santa Barbara Community Church (and your experience in homegroups).
Does "love" characterize our community of faith? How could SBCC fall into this
egregious error?

What is the remedy for the Ephesian church? Look for three specific words of instruction. Why does Jesus place an emphasis on memory?

Commenting on 2:4, Robert Mounce writes,

Every virtue carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. (Mounce, p. 88)

What are the virtues of SBCC? What “seeds of destruction” might be contained in those virtues? What can you do to help your church avoid *lovelessness*?

Virtue

Potential Seed of Destruction

Two non-biblical stories of the Apostle John’s life are significant with regard to this letter. First, John cared so much about proper doctrine that he rushed out of the local bathhouse at Ephesus upon learning that the heretic Cerinthus was taking his bath.¹ Polycarp tells us that the Apostle John cried,

Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth is within!

On the other hand, this staunch defender of the truth (see 1 John in particular) insisted that the Christian faith is all about love. We think John lived into his nineties and spent his latter years in the church of Ephesus. Church tradition tells us that the old man

¹ Cerinthus was a “Gnostic” teacher who denied the real humanity of Jesus (see 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7).

reduced his preaching to a single-sentence sermon which he would preach before or after the younger preachers took their turn. The content of the sermon?

Little children, love one another.

G. B. Caird's comment is provocative and worthy of our meditation.

They had set out to be defenders of the faith, arming themselves with the heroic virtues of truth and courage, only to discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality without which all others are worthless. John has much to tell us about the demonic process by which all that is noble and good can be distorted into opposition to God, but nothing more eloquent than this simple statement that zeal for Christian truth may obliterate the one truth that matters, that God is love. (Caird, p. 31)

As a homegroup include the reading of 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 John 4:7-21 before your evening is over.

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Three

Smyrna: Ten Days of Testing

Revelation 2:8-11

Tuesday April 20, 1999 is a day of infamy in American history. It was on that day that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered their high school in Littleton, Colorado and began shooting their classmates. The violence was discriminate. It appears the two gunmen targeted “jocks,” minorities and Christians. In the end eight Christians were killed, four from a single youth group at a local church. Among the slain was Cassie Bernall, a seventeen-year-old junior with long blond hair. One of the gunmen pointed his rifle at Cassie and asking, “Do you believe in God?” She knows that if she says "yes," she'll pay with her life. But unfaithfulness to her Lord is unthinkable to the recent convert. “There is a God,” she replies, “and you need to follow along God’s path.”¹ Within seconds Cassie was dead.

Suffering for one’s faith is not the normal experience of Christians in our time and place. We are as likely to be rewarded for our commitment to Christ (“Doesn’t he have nice values. . .”) as persecuted. Such was not the case for the church in Smyrna. Here we find a church which is suffering greatly.

Read these verses carefully. Read them several times and compare translations. Fill in the chart on page 12. What is missing from this letter?

Before going on in this study make a list of the elements of this letter which puzzle you. What questions come to mind as you read?

¹ Accounts of this incident vary. Some say Cassie responded only with the word “yes.”

We might think of Smyrna as the “Santa Barbara” of Asia Minor. The city had a long history, it was culturally relevant, religiously active and boasted of tremendous physical geography. Smyrna was a great place to live. The economy was robust and the cost of living high. The rich loved to dwell in Smyrna.

The city lies about 40 miles north of Ephesus and, at the time John wrote Revelation, was inhabited by about 200,000 people. Smyrna (modern day Izmir) was a significant seaport and sat at the entrance to the Hermus River valley. The main street of the city was called the “Golden Street.” It was paved and had temples to various Greek gods including Zeus and Cybele. Smyrnaeans boasted that Homer was born in their city. In 195 BC the temple to the Goddess of Rome was constructed. They were proud that in 23 AD they were awarded the privilege of building the Asiatic temple of Tiberius.

In the midst of all the grandeur of Smyrna, amid this town which was a center for science, medicine and pagan worship, was a small group of Christians who suffered greatly for their faith.

Notes and Questions:

Consider 2:8. The word translated *affliction* or *tibulation* is strong. It denotes “crushing pressure.” The same word is translated as *persecution* in vs. 10. When we learn that some are in prison (2:10) we shouldn’t think of this as the punishment. Prison in the first century was not a place of punishment, it was a holding cell while the accused waited trial. To be in prison was to face, in this case, possible death.

What does Jesus have in mind when he says,

I know your affliction and your poverty even though you are rich.

In what way do you think the Smyrnaean church was “poor”? In what way were they “rich”? Evaluate SBCC according to the same standards.

2:9 is intriguing. What does the text mean when it refers to the *synagogue of Satan*? One possibility is that John is alluding to the corruption of the Jewish synagogue. There is some evidence that the Jews of Smyrna incorporated the worship of Zeus into their

worship.¹ A second possibility is that John is speaking in a similar manner as Paul in Romans 2.

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Rom. 2:28-29

A third possibility is that the words *synagogue of Satan* refer to the pagan practices of Smyrna and have nothing to do with the Jewish population of that city.

In any case John introduces the theme of Satan for the first time in Revelation. Here we find the ultimate cause of the persecution of the church. Notice the two words used for this foe of the church.

1. Satan. The word means “adversary” in Hebrew and “slanderer” or “false accuser” in Greek.
2. Devil (2:10). This title (*diabolos* in Greek) means “slanderer.” If we turn this noun into a verb (*diaballo*) it means to accuse, or to bring charges with hostile intent.²

Satan, or the Devil, is a spirit being who is set against God and his purposes throughout history. There is much we don’t know about this spirit being, but the book of Revelation assures us that Satan’s authority is limited and temporary.

Consider some of the references to Satan in the following pages of John’s Revelation (get ready for a peek into the more intriguing sections of our book). Don’t worry about the details of John’s vision, look for what is clear. What do we learn about Satan from these verses?

- 2:13
- 9:7-11
- 12:9-12
- 20:1-10

¹ Cf. Ford, pp. 392-96.

² See DNTT, vol. 3, p. 468.

In light of Revelation 2:8-11 and in light of what you have just read, respond to the following quotation.

Throughout his book John is constantly trying to show how Satan's hand may be detected in the affairs of this world; but he is equally insistent that Satan can do nothing except by permission of God, who uses Satan's grimmest machinations to further his own bright designs. (Caird, p. 36)

Jesus promises the Smyrnaean church that their affliction will last for *ten days*. As we should expect, interpretations vary. Most see *ten days* as a round number covering an unspecified period. Some see the image as a reference to a long period of time while others see this as a short period of time. In either case the encouragement is sobering:

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (2:10)

By the time of Domitian, annual emperor worship was required for every Roman citizen on the threat of death. The man or woman had to burn incense on the altar dedicated to Caesar and then was awarded a certificate of verification.

Consider what a difficult decision was placed before the followers of Christ.

Such an act was probably considered more as an expression of political loyalty than religious worship, and all a citizen had to do was burn a pinch of incense and say, "Caesar is Lord [kyrios]." Yet most Christians refused to do this. (Johnson, p. 437)

Picture yourself as an elder/pastor of the church of Smyrna. One of your home group leaders was placed in prison last week for her refusal to offer incense to Caesar. But another young university student, who helps lead worship most Sundays, announced that he decided the incense offering was "not a problem for me." He didn't really mean it, crossed his fingers as he said the oath and was happy to have his certificate. What do you do, as a church leader, with those who decide to pay homage to another god?

It is easy to sentimentalize the persecution of the church. Many of us have heard sermons which proclaim, “When the church of Christ is persecuted, it grows in depth and in numbers!!!”

Think about the church of Smyrna. What would some of the nitty-gritty effects of genuine persecution be on this community of believers?

What does the Church in America have to learn from this letter? For the most part, we know little of the “affliction” mentioned in 2:9. The craze in the 1990s has been to make the church more “seeker sensitive” in order to attract the non-believer. What would the advantages be to SBCC if we were a persecuted church (try to think of several). What would the disadvantages be if we suffered persecution?

Advantages

Disadvantages

Much of Revelation is a book written to inform God’s people how to live the Christian life during difficult times. How do you think your faith would change if you lived in Smyrna during the time of John’s letter?

Study Four

Pergamum: The Church of Religious Compromise

Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum had the opposite problem of the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was distinct from her pagan culture and would not tolerate any teachers in her midst who made a compromise with the imperial cult. The problem was that in her doctrinal rigidity the Ephesian church became loveless. Pergamum, on the other hand, has no such charge. Here we find a faithful yet compromised church. Ephesus *hated the work of the Nicolaitans* while Pergamum has some *who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans* (2:6; 2:15).

Read Revelation 2:12-17 and fill in the chart on page 12. This letter is loaded with symbols and images which will be confusing to our twenty-first century ears. Make a list of any questions you have of

this letter.

Pergamum, in a manner similar to Ephesus and Smyrna, was a spectacular city.¹ Pliny called it “by far the most distinguished city in Asia.” The city’s physical geography was

¹ Ramsay is exuberant in his memory of Pergamum. “History marked it out as the royal city, and not less clearly has nature done so. No city of the whole of Asia Minor—so far as I have seen, and there are few of any importance which I have not seen—possesses the same imposing and dominating aspect. It is the one city of the land which forced from me the exclamation, ‘A royal city!’ I came to it after seeing the others, and that was the impression which it produced.” (Ramsay, p. 216)

stunning in that it was built on a hill towering one thousand feet above the surrounding valley of the Caicus. The name Pergamum comes from the word “citadel.”

Pergamum, located 45 miles north of Smyrna, was a cultural center. The town’s library contained more than 200,000 volumes and was the second largest library in the world.¹ It was claimed that parchment was invented in this city.

Pergamum was a religious center. It contained temples dedicated to Dionysus (god of wine), Athena (goddess of wisdom), Asclepius (the god of healing) and Demeter (goddess of harvest) along with three temples to the emperor or imperial cult. At the center of it all was the altar to Zeus, the principal god of the Greek pantheon of gods.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, to find the letter calling Pergamum “Satan’s throne.” This city was the official center of the imperial cult of Rome. To the casual visitor it looked like Rome was in control of this city, but to John the city was *Satan’s throne*.

Notes and Questions:

Some of the details of this letter are fascinating.

- **2:12** Jesus’ self-description is a claim to sovereignty (authority) over the city addressed. Because Pergamum was the official capital of this Roman province, it was given the “right of the sword,” i.e., the right of life and death. Ramsay notes “In Roman estimation the sword was the symbol of the highest order of official authority, with which the proconsul of Asia was invested.” (Ramsay, p. 214) But here we learn that Jesus is the one who has the ultimate *two-edged sword*. The church need not fear, Jesus is the ultimate authority.
- **2:13** Antipas was put to death. We don’t know anything about Antipas or the circumstances of his death, but his mention shows the serious nature of the persecution the Pergamum church faced.
- The Greek word appearing in most of our translations as *my witness* is *martyr*. Scholars see here one of the earliest uses of this word as a technical term (shorthand) for one who dies for his or her faith.

2:14-15 are difficult. Who is Balaam and who is Balak? Who are the Nicolaitans?

The reference to Balaam would take the reader back to the book of Numbers 22—25. There we read of Balaam who attempted to serve both God and God’s enemies. The story makes for great reading. Consider this brief summary:

¹ Alexandria, Egypt had the largest library.

The story is set during the time of Israel's wandering in the desert for 40 years. While camped on the plains of Moab, near the promised land, the prophet Balaam was summoned by Balak, King of the Moabites. Balak, it turns out, was terrified of the Israelites because they had prevailed over the Amorites in a recent battle.

Clear so far? Balak hires Balaam to pronounce a prophetic curse on Israel. Balaam tries to do this but is unable so Balaam comes up with an alternative plan: "Get the Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men. In time their hearts will be turned away from Yahweh (the God of Israel) and Yahweh will send his wrath on Israel."

The plan worked. Numbers 25:1-3 reads,

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

With the above background in mind re-read Revelation 2:14. Balak got what he wanted through deception, through chicanery. Satan's goal of captivating the church in Pergamum was unattainable through persecution (2:13), but the evil one succeeded in enticing the church to participate in some form of paganism.

We don't know who the Nicolaitans were. But, in context, it seems best to view them as a group of Christians who preached compromise with the imperial cult. "At Pergamum, where Satan sat enthroned, some within the church had decided that accommodation was the wisest policy." (Mounce, p. 98)

The nitty-gritty implications of Jesus' critique are shocking.

The combination of "food sacrificed to idols" with "sexual immorality" may refer to the common practice of participating in the sacrificial meal of the pagan gods (cf. 1 Cor 10:19—22) and indulging in sexual intercourse with temple priestesses in cult prostitution. This is the more normal way to understand the term "sexual immorality" in the context of the pagan gods. . . . [The] prevalence of sexual immorality in first-century pagan society makes it entirely possible that some Christians at Pergamum were still participating in the holiday festivities and saw no wrong in indulging in the "harmless" table in the temples and the sexual excitement everyone else was enjoying. (Johnson, p. 441)

Caird summarizes the problem more succinctly.

The sum total of the Nicolaitans' offense, then, is that they took a laxer attitude than John to pagan society and religion. (Caird, p. 39)

Think through current cultural and societal practices. Think of our postmodern festivals and rituals. What are the “religious temptations” of the church today? In what ways are you tempted to be a “Nicolaitan”?

Notice the close interplay between idolatry and sexual immorality. We find this throughout the Scriptures and throughout history. Earl Palmer probes the close connection. Think about this quotation in light of our own culture. We are a sexually licentious society. Are we also a pagan society? How do the two correspond to one another?

[N]otice that idolatry and interpersonal immorality are combined in an earlier part of the passage. This means that at the heart of interpersonal hurtfulness and broken relationships is a basic confusion of primary loyalty. When a person worships something other than the true God, the result is that a confusion sets in; there is a breakdown of personal identity because the “no gods” we choose to worship other than the true God always robs us of our own identity first of all; then what follows is an inevitable hurtfulness toward the persons of our lives. (Palmer, p. 137)

The Pergamum church was “open” to Roman religion. Think about the American church (broadly). Where do you see tolerance of *the Nicolaitans*? What would Jesus’ charge be to the church of Pergamum/USA in the year 2000?

Answer the same question with regard to SBCC. If Santa Barbara Community Church errs on one side or the other, is it the Ephesian error or the Pergamum error? On which side of the error do you fall?

2:17 contains three difficult images.

First, to those who overcome is the promise of *hidden manna*. This looks back, again, to the wilderness period of Israel's history. God supplied manna for the people to eat in the desert. There was a Jewish tradition (not found in the Bible) that the manna contained in the ark of the covenant (Exodus 16:32-34) was taken from the temple and hidden underground when the Babylonians destroyed the temple (586 BC). It was to remain there until the time when Messiah came. Then Jeremiah would reappear and take the manna into the reconstructed temple. If John is working with this tradition it would have provided great comfort to Jewish readers. Messiah is here, the manna will be yours.

Second, the overcomer will receive a *white stone*. One commentator claims there are over twelve plausible interpretations of the significance of this stone (cf. Mounce, p. 99). Some see here a reference to marking a good day with a white stone. Others see John having fun with a Roman symbol of victory (It is really the church which is victorious). A good guess is that the white stone was borrowed from a Roman courtroom. There a juror would vote with a white (innocent) or black (guilty) stone. Still another good possibility is to see the stone as a *tessera*, that is, a token for admission to a banquet. This fits with the offering of *hidden manna* when Messiah comes!

Third, each stone has written upon it a *new name*. Who knows? Is this the name Christ? Or is this a reference to the Roman practice of giving a patient who recovered from a serious illness a *new name* to signify complete recovery (cf. Palmer, p. 138)?

Consider the promises of 2:17. What practical application could they have for your life today? How could these promises encourage you?

Each of these letters closes with the words

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Do you have an ear? What do you hear the Spirit saying to the churches? What do you hear the Spirit saying to you? What do you hear the Spirit saying to SBCC?

Pray for Santa Barbara Community Church as a homegroup. Pray that she would be a community of believers attentive to the Holy Spirit's voice.

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Five

Thyatira: The Church of Cultural Compromise

Revelation 2:18-29

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) Jesus calls his followers the *salt of the earth*, and the *light of the world*. The metaphors are loaded with significance, but consider the obvious. In using these figures of speech Jesus points to two distinct communities. There is the *world* and then there is the church. There is the *earth* and then there is a group set apart from the whole which is called *salt*. During his prayer for the disciples, Jesus prayed that his followers would be “in but not of” the world (John 17:15ff). They were to penetrate the present evil age, but they were also to make sure the “world” didn’t penetrate them. We might call this the problem of distance. How closely may a Christian get to the world without the world getting to the Christian? Some in the Thyatiran church drew too close. The judgment of Christ loomed on the horizon.

Ramsay calls this letter “the most obscure . . . the longest, and probably . . . the most instructive of all the seven letters.” (Ramsay, p. 240) Read this obscure, long and instructive letter from whatever translations you have available (they might differ more than with the other letters). Fill in the chart on page 12 during one of your readings. Again, before going on in this study, jot down any thoughts and questions the letter brings to your mind.

Notes and Questions:

2:18 contains the only use of the title *Son of God* in Revelation. This may be John’s choice of words because later in the letter he will paraphrase Psalm 2 which looks forward to a messianic “Son of God.” The title might also be John’s way, again, of showing the superiority of Jesus over the imperial cult which labeled Caesar as the “Son of God.”

2:19 What is the five-fold (six-fold?) commendation of this church?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How is it that a body of believers can have such a robust commendation followed by such a serious charge (vss. 20ff.)? Would Jesus say this about SBCC?

2:20ff. Recall Ramsay's comment that this letter is obscure. The charge against Thyatira is subject to a variety of interpretations. At face value, the church is criticized for her tolerance of *that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess*.

Is there really a woman in the church named Jezebel, or is this the name Jesus gives her to inspire an Old Testament comparison with the woman of the same name? Does *Jezebel* stand for a faction of this church? What is meant by *sexual immorality* (NIV) or *fornication* (NRSV) or *acts of immorality* (NASB)?

A clue to at least some of our questions comes from examining what we know about Thyatira. The city was the least important of the seven cities addressed. Thyatira lies 45 miles east of Pergamum and was unimportant in every way. The city was not a religious center for paganism, not particularly beautiful, it was not even on an important trade route. Mojave, Lancaster, King City!

But Thyatira was a city of workers.

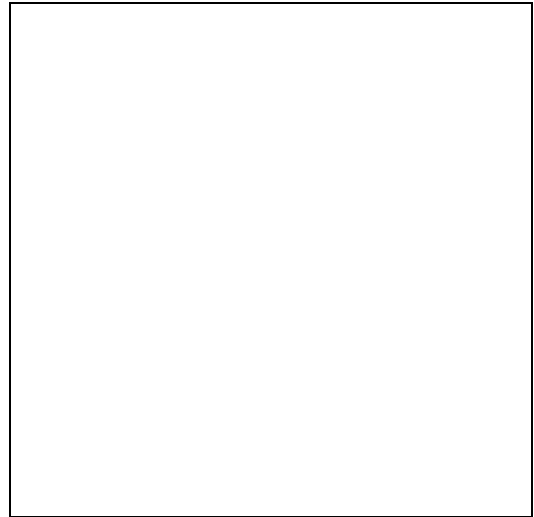
. . . more trade guilds are known in Thyatira than in any other Asian city. The inscriptions, though hardly numerous, mention the following: wool workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers and bronzesmiths. (Ramsay, p. 238)

Thyatira was a place to do business. Accordingly, the Christian church had to grapple with doing business in a pagan environment. To do business one had to be a member of the local guild (like our unions). But to be a member of a guild required that person to attend periodic banquets and gatherings where pagan foods and, perhaps, sexual practices, would be a part of the festivities. "What was a Christian to do? If he did not conform he was out of a job." (Morris, p. 71)

The criticism Jesus offers this church is best taken at face value. There appears to be a woman prophetess in the church who is leading some in the congregation into compromise with their culture.

Note at the outset that the church is condemned neither for its interest in the prophetic nor for the fact that it is a woman who is doing the prophesying.

The genuine gift of prophecy was highly respected in the early church. Along with apostles, teachers, and elders, prophets were often elevated to leadership (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11). Women also received the genuine gift of prophecy (Luke 2:36; Acts 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5). Prophets generally brought direct revelation from God in the form of teaching as well as occasional predictions of the future (Acts 11:27). Tests for a true prophet, as for the true apostle (2:2), were available but often difficult to apply. (Johnson, p. 444)



But why call the woman Jezebel? The name brings to mind the wife of King Ahab.

Read the following passages. What can you glean about the Jezebel of Thyatira from these verses?

1 Kings 16:30-33

1 Kings 21:1-25 (note especially verse 25)

2 Kings 9:22

Notice the different ways our translators render the sin in 2:20 (see above). In the Old Testament *fornication* was often literal and often a figure of speech for idolatry.

Caird writes,

It is highly improbable that a church in such a healthy condition would have tolerated the preaching of sexual immorality, even by one who claimed the authority of the Spirit. The word **fornication** . . . means religious infidelity, and the woman's **lovers** and **children** are the devotees and disciples of her teaching. (Caird, p. 44, emphasis is Caird's)

With the above in mind ponder Ezekiel 16 (especially verses 15-34, 47, 58). This text is shocking in its imagery and shows the gravity of spiritual fornication.

2:22 may contain an irony. The word for "bed" can refer to a normal bed in which one sleeps or the word could refer to the couch used during idol feasts in the city (Ramsay, p. 257). The bed of idolatry will become a *bed of suffering*.

Think about life at the beginning of the twenty-first century in Santa Barbara. Where do you work? What compromises with the world are you tempted to make? Have everyone in your group answer this question. How can your group pray for you to stay away from compromise?

Why do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

A Christian's primary commitment to God will make him or her a less effective worker for his or her employer.

2:23 lends us a glimpse at the all encompassing gaze of our Lord. Jesus is the one who searches *minds and hearts*. The NIV renders these two Greek words *hearts and minds*. Literally the text reads, kidneys and hearts. The kidney was the moral center of a person in Hebrew thought while the heart represented the whole person.

Nothing in our inner self is hidden from God. Have you ever thought of Jesus looking at your kidneys? Compare Hebrews 4:12-13. How is it with your kidneys?

2:24 The *deep things of Satan* may have been a part of Jezebel's scheme.

The reasoning . . . might have gone something like this: The only effective way to confront Satan was to enter into his strongholds; the real nature of sin could only be learned by experience, and therefore only those who had really experienced sin could truly appreciate grace. So by experiencing the depths of paganism ("the deep secrets of Satan"), one would better be equipped to serve Christ, or be an example of freedom to his brothers (cf. 1 Cor 8:9-11). The sin of Jezebel was deadly serious because of the depths of its deception. (Johnson, p. 446)¹

Notice the encouragement in vss. 26ff. Those who are faithful will rule the nations with Jesus. Palmer sees John's paraphrase of Psalm 2 as a great encouragement to our often mundane work lives.

The approach of this letter is to place the daily lives of the Christians upon a larger stage and within a larger context. I must see my task, my daily deployment, as a part of the larger goal of my life. This is the only way that I can correctly size up the demands of any job so that on the one hand I am a good and hard worker and yet on the other I keep faith with my integrity and my greater loyalties. The letter quotes Psalm 2 to assure these Christians there is a greater management to which we belong. (Palmer, p. 143)

2:28 The overcomer is promised *the morning star*. Compare 2 Peter 1:19 and Revelation 22:16. How do these verses explain the promise of this letter?

¹ Another possibility is that Jezebel taught "the deep things" and Jesus mocks her teaching by attaching Satan to her phrase (cf. Wilcock, p. 50).

Several of these letters speak of “overcoming.” What do you think it means to be an overcomer in our time and place?

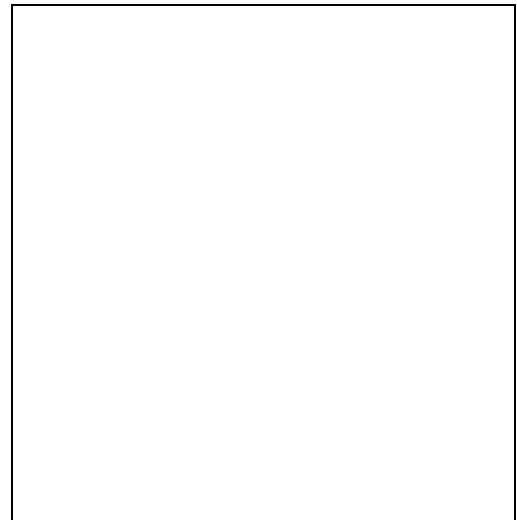
How is it with you and your employment? Is this a place of compromise? Do you worship your work? Has a promotion or a career path become an idol? Would you be willing to work for less if the work was more meaningful? Who goes to work with you? Jesus or Jezebel?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Six
Sardis: Alive But Dead
Revelation 3:1-6

If attendance, staff and technology are used to measure the American church, there is much to celebrate. Our country boasts over 500 “mega” churches with weekly attendance of two thousand or more congregants. Church members watch the pastor preach on giant video screens, hear excellent music through tremendous sound systems, and, perhaps, have lunch in the food court after the service. Comfortable theater style seats have replaced pews and Powerpoint software has replaced the traditional hymnal. Parents are given pagers to alert them when their child is throwing blocks at other children. Churches even post their announcements and study-guides on stylized Web sites.

Are these trends good or bad? Is the church at the end of the second millennium alive or dead? Would Jesus commend or condemn the church of our era? More important, How would Jesus evaluate the “life- vitality” of Santa Barbara Community Church?



Read Revelation 3:1-6 from as many translations as you have available. Fill out the chart on page 12 (Be careful here. You may have to look a bit harder for the commendation of this church). What stands out in this brief letter? What questions come to mind as you read?

As usual, the geography and history of the town to which the letter is addressed adds a colorful backdrop to the contents of Jesus’ message.

Sardis had a splendid, though checkered history. The city, about thirty miles east of Thyatira, was in decline. Its glory was rapidly becoming a distant memory. Several features of Sardis are pertinent.

First, Sardis was a physically secure city, almost impregnable. The ancient city sat on top of an 800 foot acropolis at the end of a valley. The steep walls of the hillside could not be scaled by an invading army. Or so it was thought. A single isthmus led to the town which was easily defensible.

Second, Sardis was a wealthy city. It was on the major trade route to the Aegean Islands. The city was a good place to make money!

Third, Sardis was the home of a famous, though unfinished temple to Artemis. This deity was thought to give life to the dead.

Fourth, Sardis was fascinated with death. Seven miles from the city was the cemetery of “a thousand hills.” Literally hundreds of burial mounds were visible to the observer.

Fifth, Sardis had been routed by foreign invaders two times. Cyrus conquered the city in the sixth century B.C. when a few Persian soldiers scaled the wall of the acropolis under the cover of night and took a sleeping (dead) city. Two hundred years later Antiochus repeated the feat.

By the time of Revelation Sardis was but a shadow of its former glory. William Ramsay writes,

In the Roman period it was almost like a city of the past, a relic of the period of barbaric warfare, which lived rather on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions. (Ramsay, p. 259)

Notes and Questions:

3:1 contains a difficult phrase. The letter is from *him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars*. To interpret the seven stars we need only to turn to Rev. 1:20, but what are we to make of the *seven spirits of God*? The phrase “sounds” like something we would expect in this book. Ramsay’s explanation lends insight.

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Look carefully at this letter. Is this church called dead because it is simply “going through the motions”? What is the essence of the Sardian problem? Look at the entire letter for your answer.

Sardis was a center for emperor worship. The town was a center for pagan worship. Did the desire for acceptance kill the church? Respond to the following quotations in light of the American (Santa Barbaran) church of our era. Are we fitting in too comfortably in our post-modern culture?

The main problem is that of a deep spiritual apathy, which may have resulted from the softness and love of luxury which characterized the secular society. . . . Spiritual indifference was due to the fact that Christians, while maintaining outwardly their good works and Christian activities, wished to adapt themselves to the luxury and pleasures of their pagan environment. (Ladd, p. 57)

[Sardis] is a church which everyone speaks well of, the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity, unable to distinguish between the peace of well-being and the peace of death. (Caird, p. 48)

What are the five commands Jesus gives to the church in Sardis?

- 1.
- 2.

3.

4.

5.

Which of these do you need to apply to your own life at this time? Why?

The first of these imperatives is, perhaps, the most significant. *Wake up!* Mounce says we should translate the verb “show yourself watchful.” Think of this in light of the history of Sardis. What are some ways in which SBCC can be a “watchful” church?

We often pray for one another in our homegroups and during our corporate services on Sunday. Usually these prayer requests are specific (for healing, for the salvation of a loved one, for a particular ministry etc.). Consider Paul’s prayers for the churches under his care. What can we learn about prayer and “watching” (Rev. 3:2) from Paul’s life? Do you make it a habit to pray for SBCC as a church?

2 Cor 13:7-9

Ephesians 1:17

Ephesians 3:18

Ephesians 6:18

Romans 1:9-10

Philippians 1:4

1 Thessalonians 1:2

2 Thessalonians 3:1

What three promises does God make to those whose clothes are not soiled (3:4-6)?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

The faithful are dressed in “white.” There may be a note of irony here. The wealthy Sardians wore colorful garments, a sign of their opulence. Slaves wore white, a sign of servitude and poverty.

Seven times in Revelation white garments are mentioned (3:5; 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13 and 19:14). Mounce summarizes.

It would seem, therefore, that the white garments promised to the overcomer in 3:5 represent an attire appropriate to the heavenly state. Since they are made white by washing in the blood of the Lamb (7:13), the figure is highly appropriate to portray justification. (Mounce, p. 113)

Are the garments of your Christian life soiled? How can you “do your laundry”? Compare Revelation 19:8 (in context).

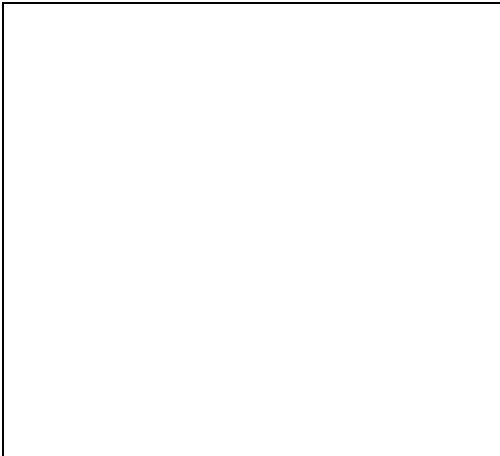
Study Seven
Philadelphia: The Open Door
Revelation 3:7-13

The churches of Revelation faced various kinds of persecution. Some churches faced the Roman imperial cult and suffered for their unwillingness to bow to the emperor. Others faced hostility from Jews (e.g. *The synagogue of Satan* in 2:9). Much of what follows the seven letters in John's apocalypse is a description of God's wrath on godless humankind (Rev. 4-22). But what of the church? Was she also destined for the wrath of God? Would the church go from the persecution of Domitian to the wrath of God? This sixth letter answers our question.

Read Revelation 3:7-13. Again, fill in the chart on page 12. Which church is most similar to the church of Philadelphia? Note the similarities of these two letters. Make a list of that which is unclear to you in this letter.

Notes and Questions:

Philadelphia was located twenty-eight miles south of Sardis and was called "the gateway to the East." It was the youngest of the cities addressed in Revelation. King Attalus II (159-138 B.C.) established the city to disseminate Greek culture to the East. The city was named because Attalus was known for his love for his brother (his nickname was "Philadelphus," i.e., "brother lover"). Philadelphia was a city of commerce and agriculture (wine). Again, we find a church in a prosperous locale.



Philadelphia was a city prone to changing its name. First it was called Philadelphia. Then, after a devastating earthquake in 17 A.D. the city was named Neocaesaria to show appreciation to Rome for rebuilding aid. During the time of Emperor Vespasian (69-70 A.D.) the town was known as Flavia.¹

The town was loyal to Dionysis, the goddess of wine, but paganism does not seem to be a factor in the life of this church. Instead, the church was facing hostility from the Jewish population of Philadelphia. This letter is loaded with allusions to the Old Testament and contains rich irony.

3:7 contains three descriptions of the writer of this letter. What are they?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Notice how each of these descriptions point to Jesus as Messiah. Consider the following verses.

Revelation 6:10

Hosea 11:9

The reference to the one who *holds the key of David* looks back to a prophecy of Isaiah. In Isaiah 22:15-25 we read of the replacement of Shebna, King Hezekah's head butler, with Eliakim. Eliakim becomes a picture of the coming messiah.

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. I will fasten him like a peg in

¹ By the fifth century Philadelphia was called "Little Athens."

a secure place, and he will become a throne of honor to his ancestral house. And they will hang on him the whole weight of his ancestral house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons.

Isa. 22:22-24

Mounce explains,

The language of Isaiah is used to present Christ as the Davidic Messiah with absolute power to control entrance to the heavenly kingdom. (Mounce, p. 116)

There are two main interpretations of the open door in verse eight.

Some see this as Jesus' promise to use the church of Philadelphia in evangelism and mission. These interpreters see this door as analogous to the open door for Paul to evangelize in Ephesus (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3).

The context, however, seems to favor a different interpretation. Verse seven is messianic and so is verse eight.

. . . in verse 8 he reminds the Christians at Philadelphia who may have been excommunicated from the local synagogue (vs. 9) that he has placed before them an open door into the eternal kingdom, and no one can shut it. No matter if the door to the synagogue has been closed, the door into the messianic kingdom remains open. (Mounce, p. 117)

This makes best sense in light of the whole letter. Jesus is writing to offer assurance to this seemingly weak (*I know that you have little strength*) church. Re-read these verses. List the ways in which Jesus reassures the Philadelphian church.

What application can we make to SBCC ("What, we don't even have our own building???")? In what ways do these words of assurance comfort your own walk with Christ?

3:9 contains an irony we might miss. Jesus is the one who *holds the key*. He is the one who has placed *an open door that no one can shut*. It is those from the *synagogue of Satan who claim to be Jews though they are not*. . . who will come and fall at the feet of the church. Where is the irony?

Israel had a tumultuous history which included civil war and near annihilation by foreign powers. In the eighth century B.C. the Assyrians plundered the northern kingdom of Israel and in the sixth century B.C. the Babylonians plundered the southern kingdom of Judah. The prophets warned Israel of the coming destruction. This was to be understood as the wrath of God on Israel for her idolatry. But the prophets always included a note of hope. In the end God will restore Israel. Consider two examples:

The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. “Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations.

Isa. 60:14-15

Kings will be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers. They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground; they will lick the dust at your feet. Then you will know that I am the LORD; those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”

Isa. 49:23¹

Now read Revelation 3:9. One commentator calls this “the grim irony of providence.”² The homage the Jews expected from the Gentiles (the nations), they themselves will one day render to the church! “[The Jews] will play the role of the heathen and acknowledge that the church is the true Israel of God.” (Mounce, p. 118)

3:10 contains an explicit promise that the church will be spared the wrath of God. As we noted above, Revelation is going to take a different hue beginning with chapter 4. The scene is going to move from earth to heaven. John will describe, with fantastic images, the glory of God and the constant worship which is God’s due. The reader will also see the glory of God in the punishment of Satan and the obliteration of evil. God’s wrath will be poured out. It is important, therefore, that the churches of Asia Minor know they will not be the recipients of that wrath. John here makes the same point as Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:9.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ See also Isa 45:14, 2:3; Zech. 8:20ff.

² Moffatt cited in Mounce, p. 118.

Revelation 3:10 has sparked a good deal of controversy among Bible interpreters.

First, what is meant by the words, *the hour of trial*? Elaborate charts have been drawn and some feisty arguments have been made over these words. Some see here a reference to a specific and literal seven year tribulation at the end of history,¹ while others see in the phrase a broad description of the coming wrath of God.

Note what our text says. The *hour of trial* is going to come *on the whole world*. God's wrath will be comprehensive (cf. Rev. 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14:1ff.; 17:8).

Second, in what way will the church be "kept" *from the hour of trial*? Again, interpretations differ. Some see here a pre-tribulation rapture of the church (If you are looking for the "rapture" in Revelation this is as close as you will come to finding it). Jesus will keep the church from the hour of testing by removing her from earth.

Others see a parallel to Jesus' prayer for his disciples in John 17.

"I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil {one.}" (NASB)

Just as the believer is protected from the evil one, he or she is protected from the wrath of God!²

¹ The idea of a seven year tribulation which comes before the second advent of Jesus has mainly been popular in the American church during this century. Scripture doesn't say much about a "seven year tribulation." It does speak of increasing persecution, and discord for those who love God (cf. Luke 21:12). Support for the notion of a literal seven year tribulation comes from the book of Daniel, especially 9:20-27. In a nutshell, Daniel prophesies that the coming time of *everlasting righteousness* will come after "seventy 'sevens'" (Dan. 9:24). Daniel 9:25 begins with the words, "Know and understand. . ." (Right!) What follows is a description of the future. But which future? Is Daniel describing the immediate period after the Babylonian captivity? Or is he describing the desecration of the temple in the second century B.C.? Does the destruction of the "city and the sanctuary" (9:26) refer to the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D.?

Read these verses and try to make sense of them. Note the similarity of these verses with Jesus' predictions in Matt. 24:7-22. If you are reading a study Bible, make sure you work with the verses before being told what they mean. It seems that all could agree with the following. First, Daniel sees the seventy years of Israel's Babylonian captivity in light of the larger scheme of history. The loneliness of life as an exile becomes a picture of Israel's deeper yearning for messiah. Second, the time preceding Messiah's rule and reign will be marked with ever increasing tribulation. The temple will be desecrated, sacrifice and offerings will cease. Jesus takes this theme and magnifies it in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. The book of Revelation appears to build on Daniel and the teaching of Jesus in showing the end as a time of intense persecution.

² Ladd explains from a "futurist" perspective. "Before these terrifying judgments, the people of God are sealed upon their foreheads that they should not be hurt by these plagues. These fearful divine judgments are directed upon those who follow the beast (16:2), those who have the seal of God will be divinely sheltered (9:4). Although the church will be on earth in these final terrible days and will suffer fierce persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the beast, she will be kept from the hour of trial which is coming

Note the wonderful promise in 3:11. *I am coming soon.* When all is said, and all interpretive debates have been concluded, we would miss the point if we failed to appreciate these words. The tiny, weak church in Philadelphia is offered comfort in the fact that her Lord is on his way!

Notice the final encouragement in 3:11. What is it? Consider a few other New Testament verses which look forward to the second coming of Christ. Can you find the same emphasis?

2 Peter 2:3-11

1 Thessalonians 5:1-8

1 Corinthians 15:58 (in context)

How should the imminent return of Jesus affect the way in which you live? Compare 1 John 3:2-3

What word of instruction can Santa Barbara Community Church take from this letter? How does this sixth letter instruct our church community?

upon the pagan world. God's wrath, poured on the kingdom of Antichrist, will not afflict his people."
(Ladd, p. 62)

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Eight

Laodicea: The Tepid Church

Revelation 3:14-22

The seventh and last of Jesus' letters to the churches of Asia Minor is, in a sense, the most shocking. Here we find no references to sexual immorality, the church does not appear to have a habit of tolerating false teaching or promoting heresy. Laodicea is not suffering persecution from Rome or from the local synagogue. Nevertheless, Jesus reserves some of his harshest words for this church and saves some of his most tender encouragement for those in this congregation.

Before reading this seventh letter consider the setting of the Laodicean church.

Laodicea was founded in about 250 B.C. by Antiochus II. He named the city after his wife Laodice. The town was in the Lycus valley at the intersection of two major trade routes and two other major roads. It became known for commerce, banking and the production of a very high quality black wool which was used to produce carpets and a tunic called a *timita*.¹ Laodicea was the home of a famous medical school which produced an ear ointment and a substance known as "Phrygian Powder" which was used as an eye salve.

Laodicea was known as the wealthiest city in Phrygia. Its inhabitants grew proud of their wealth. In 60 A.D. an earthquake damaged the city and the Laodiceans refused economic aid from Rome. "We can fix it ourselves. . ."

The downside to life in this luxurious city was the water supply. Laodicea had terrible water. Six miles to the north was Hierapolis which was famous for its medicinal hot springs. By the time of Revelation a stone aqueduct had been built from Hierapolis to Laodicea. The water which flowed into the city was lukewarm and exceedingly distasteful. Colossae, seven miles from Laodicea, enjoyed clean water from cold springs.

What allusions can you find to Laodicea's history and geography in Jesus' letter? As you read this letter (perhaps several times), fill in the chart on page 12.

¹ By the mid fifth century Laodicea was called Trimitaria (cf. Ramsay, p. 307).

Notes and Questions:

3:14 Notice the similarity of this description to Paul's description of Christ in Colossians 1:15-17. The Laodiceans had read Paul's letter to the Colossian church (cf. Col. 4:16). The emphasis in Revelation 3:14 is on Christ as the foundation of the universe. The Hebrew word *amen* means "foundation." Jesus is pointing to his truthfulness or trustworthiness with this self-designation. In Isaiah 65:16 we read,

[H]e who is blessed in the earth shall be blessed by the God of truth; And he who swears in the earth shall swear by the God of truth; Because the former troubles are forgotten, And because they are hidden from My sight! (NASB)

The *God of truth* in Hebrew reads, the God of *amen*.

3:15-16 form the heart of our letter and contain the central criticism of Jesus regarding this chapter of his church. The church of Laodicea had grown as tepid as the water supply from Hierapolis. Jesus is disgusted. Wilcock notes, "The lukewarmness of Laodicea is the worst condition to which a church can sink." (Wilcock, p. 57) Here we find a church drifting along, going through the motions of religion without the corresponding reality of a warm relation with Christ. Ramsay's description of Laodicea is poignant.

There is no city whose spirit and nature are more difficult to describe than Laodicea. There are no extremes, and hardly any very strongly marked features. But in this even balance lies its peculiar character. Those were the qualities that contributed to make it essentially the successful trading city, the city of bankers and finance, which could adapt itself to the needs and wishes of others, ever pliable and accommodating, full of the spirit of compromise. (Ramsay, p. 312)

What factors do you think contributed to the state of the Laodicean church?

There are two different understandings of Jesus' criticism of this church. What does he mean when he says,

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot.

Some see *hot* as a reference to a vital faith which is alive and active while *cold* refers to the outright rejection of the faith. If this is what is in mind then Jesus is saying, “I wish you were really for me or really against me. Your lukewarm middle makes me want to spit you out of my mouth.”

Another interpretation sees *hot* and *cold* as equally good. Both are the equivalent of spiritual vitality. The hot waters of Hierapolis were useful for washing and for healing. The cold spring waters of Colossae were useful for drinking and refreshment.

Which interpretation makes more sense to you? Why?

Think about the life of a church. What can lead a “hot” (or hot/cold) church in our era to become *neither hot nor cold*? What happens to a church community to make it a tepid community? Consider verse 17 as you answer this question.

Notice the threefold criticism in verse 17. How would this list surprise the Laodiceans?

What is the threefold counsel of Jesus to the Laodicean church? What do these images bring to mind? How can SBCC apply these words of encouragement?

Gold refined in the fire see 1 Peter 1:7

White clothes see Revelation 19:8

Eye-salve see Ephesians 1:18

Think of the way in which we pray as a church. Do we find ourselves praying for the spiritual vitality of our church community? Consider Paul's prayers for two churches. Read Ephesians 1:16-23 and Colossians 1:9-14. What are the components of Paul's prayers for the church?

How can SBCC guard against becoming a Laodicean church?

Spend time as a homegroup praying for the spiritual life of SBCC. Use these prayers as a model for your own prayers. What can we do to make this a habitual prayer in our homegroups? How can we make prayer for spiritual vitality more "normal" than prayer for health, employment or guidance?

Is the American church most similar to the Laodicean church? Respond to the following quotation.

The hot tub is the perfect symbol of the modern root to religion. The hot tub experience is sensuous, relaxing, laid-back, not in any way demanding, whether intellectually or otherwise. When modern Western man turns to religion what he wants is total tickling relaxation. The senses being at once soothed, supported and effortlessly invigorated. If there were no more to our Christianity than hot tub factors, if, that is, we embraced a self-absorbed hedonism of relaxation and happy feelings while dodging tough talks, unpopular stances and exhausting relationships, we should fall far short of biblical God centeredness and the cross bearing life to which Jesus calls us. (J. I. Packer, Hot Tub Religion)

Notice the wonderful irony of 3:19ff. Here the Christ who died to create the church (Eph. 5:25) stands on the threshold of her door waiting to re-enter the community which had excluded him. The image of dining expresses warmth and solidarity. Jesus can find nothing to commend in this lukewarm church, but such is his lovingkindness that he is eager to rekindle the flame which has burned out. G. Campbell Morgan observes,

There is no other cure . . . for the lukewarmness of the Church than the re-admitted Christ.¹

Think back over the past seven studies. Look at the chart you have filled out on page 12. How has your vision of the church changed? What concerns have these letters brought to your thinking about the church?

What would Jesus emphasize in a letter to SBCC? Write a brief letter from Jesus to Santa Barbara Community Church. Share this letter with your homegroup.

¹ Cited in Walvoord, p. 97.

Introduction to Revelation 4-22

Music in Heaven!

Students of Revelation are shocked at how many different outlines of Revelation make sense. John's apocalypse is so multi-layered, so rich in theology, so deep in its portrait of God's glory that there seem to be many ways to understand John's structure. Probably everyone would agree that the book, at a minimum, has three sections:

1. Introduction: John's vision of Jesus in his glory (Revelation 1)
2. Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3)
3. John's vision of God's glory (Revelation 4-22)

With Revelation 4:1 we come to the third major section of John's apocalypse. Before going on in this study re-read (or peruse) the introduction of this study guide. Re-familiarize yourself with the various ways this book has been interpreted and the emphases we will find in the chapters which follow.

Once you have done the above, consider the following brief outline of the *contents* of chapters 4-22 (some of the details are listed below to give us a view of the particulars of the book).¹

Revelation 4-22

1. A Vision of Christ in his glory (4)
2. The Seven Seals (5:1— 8:5)
3. The Seven Trumpets (8:6—11:19)
4. The Seven Signs (12:1—14:20)
 - a. The woman clothed with the sun (12:1-6)

¹ Based on Morris, p. 44.

- b. Satan cast out (12:7-12)
 - c. War between Satan and the woman and her son (12:13-17)
 - d. The beast from the sea (13:1-10)
 - e. The beast from the earth (13:11-18)
 - f. The Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1-5)
 - g. The harvest of the earth (14:6-20)
5. The Seven Bowls of Wrath (15:1—16:21)
6. The Supremacy of God (17:1—20:15)
- a. The judgment of the great whore (17:1-18)
 - b. The judgment of Babylon (18:1—19:5)
 - c. The wedding supper of the Lamb (19:6-10)
 - d. The final victory (19:11—22:5)
7. Epilogue (22:6-21)

We should not assume from this outline that John is telling a linear story of *what must take place after this* (4:1). To the contrary, there are numerous indications of backtracking and re-telling the major themes of John's apocalypse.¹ William Hendrickson understands the entire book as seven parallel sections that tell the story of history (from the first to the second coming of Christ) in seven different ways!²

Each section gives us a description of the entire Gospel Age, from the first to the second coming of Christ, and is rooted in Israel's history under the old dispensation to which there are frequent references. (Hendrickson, p. 26)

- 1. Christ in the midst of the Seven Golden Lampstands (the church) (1-3)
- 2. The Book with Seven Seals (4-7)
- 3. The Seven Trumpets of Judgment (8-11)
- 4. The Woman and the Man-Child persecuted by the Dragon and his Helpers (the Beast and the Harlot) (12-14)
- 5. The Seven Bowls of Wrath (15-16)
- 6. The Fall of the Great Harlot and of the Beasts (17-19)

¹ cf. Wilcock, p. 85-87.

² One of Hendrickson's examples is to compare Revelation 20 with Revelation 12. Each tells the same story in a different manner.

7. The Judgment upon the Dragon (Satan) followed by the New Heaven and Earth, New Jerusalem (20-22)¹

We need not adopt all of Hendrickson’s scheme to recognize his point: Revelation is not to be read like a novel telling a story in chronological order.

In the introduction to this study guide we noted that the Greek name of Revelation is *Apocalupsis*, which means “unveiling.” John is using a writing style called “apocalyptic writing.” First century readers were familiar with this genre of literature, but we are not.

[Revelation] stands in the Old Testament—New Testament tradition of apocalyptic writing.² The nature of apocalyptic literature is distinguished by the threefold mixture of hiddenness³, of vast upheaval, and of decisive divine act. There is often a heavy pessimism on one page, which is then surprised by the sudden breakthrough of God’s mighty act on the next page. (Palmer, p. 99)

Two interpretive principles will guide our study of these chapters.⁴ **First**, we will prefer the lean interpretation over the elaborate. We have to ask what the original readers were to receive from this letter. Those who want to see John giving a prophecy of last week’s newspaper headlines will have to find another study guide. Revelation is best read as a simple proclamation of the glory and supremacy of God over everything and everyone that opposes Him.

Second, we will interpret the rich imagery of John’s apocalypse in light of the songs which are offered to God. Revelation is a book of worship. The scene shifts repeatedly in chapters 4-22 from heaven to earth. History is presented as a cosmic battle between Satan and God.⁵ But everywhere we turn in this book we find the triumph of God and the ultimate protection of his people! Worship is the response of every creature of the universe. Accordingly we might consider still another outline of Revelation 4-22 as a series of seven worship services punctuated with the judgment of God.

First Worship Service (Revelation 4-5)

Seven seals (6:1-8:5)

Second Worship Service (7:9-17)

¹ cf. Hendrickson, p. 30.

² We can find examples of apocalyptic writing in Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.

³ Think about Revelation from the perspective of a persecuted Christian under the Roman Imperial cult. The beast with his ten diademed horns would bring to mind the Roman emperors in general or Domitian specifically. Babylon is a symbol for Roman power. The woman of 17:1 is, perhaps, a symbol for the city of Rome. As William Ramsay points out, “The shadow of the Roman empire broods over the whole of the Apocalypse.” (Ramsay, p. 67)

⁴ cf. Palmer, pp. 106-109.

⁵ See for example 12:1-17. This is John’s version of the Christmas story told in cosmic dimensions.

Seven Trumpets (8:6-11:19)

Third Worship Service (11:15-19)

The woman, the dragon, the two beasts (12-13)

Fourth Worship Service (14:1-5)

Three angels (14:6-20)

Fifth Worship Service (15:1-4)

Seven angels, seven plagues, seven bowls of wrath (15:5—18)

Sixth Worship Service (19:1-10)

The Last Battle, the Millennium, Satan's doom, the final judgment (19:11-20:15)

Seventh Worship Service (21-22)

The New Jerusalem, The Tree of Life

Notice the clarity of the worship in these sections of Revelation. Read each of these songs to God (the fourth and seventh worship services have no text). What do you learn about the greatness and soul-satisfying sufficiency of our Lord? How should these songs shape our lives of worship?

Study Nine

Five Songs of Worship

Revelation 4-5

The letters to the churches of Asia Minor end with an invitation to worship.

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the
door, I will go in and eat with him, and he
with me. (3:20)*

It also ends with the promise that the overcomer will sit with Jesus on his throne (3:21). The vision of Revelation 4-5 pick up on both these themes. The scene of these two chapters (twenty-five verses) is nothing less than stupendous. The picture becomes that of the entire universe busy in worship. Worship is what we will do forever as we surround the throne of God himself. One commentator refers to a “radius of praise” which draws our attention continually to the center where the Father and the Christ share the throne of the cosmos. (Wilcock, p. 69)

Read these twenty-five verses from as many translations as you have available. Try not to worry about the imagery (let it stand on its own for a moment). Concentrate on the big picture. Make a drawing of John’s vision (this should be easier than it sounds). Make a list of all who are (or will be) in this vision. How many creatures will worship the Lamb?

Notes and Questions:

4:1 has an open door to heaven (cf. 3:7). The scene is shifting from the earthly church to the dwelling place of God.¹

Think about your understanding of God. Compare this with John's vision in Revelation 4-5. What do you think John experienced in this vision?

Notice John's view of history in 4:1. History is not the result of earthly power or accidental events. John is to be shown what *must* take place. God's will is the determining factor of history. The persecuted church needs to know that that it is suffering is within the boundaries God has set. The theological word for God's direction of history is providence. The meaning of the word is "to see in advance or beforehand," or, "to provide for." This theological term refers to the truth that what God created he sustains. God is behind the events of world history, leading, shaping, guiding. He also is provident in the lives of his people.²

How does this biblical teaching affect your daily attitude as you face troubles in your life (from a broken car to 'behind the back' comments at work because of your Christian convictions)?

¹ We should be aware that John uses the word heaven and heavens in different ways. Heaven is a place or sphere which will eventually be destroyed and replaced (21:1). It is a place of cosmic conflict (12:7). Sometimes the word is synonymous with the sky (Most English translations translate the same Greek word as "sky" in 6:13).

² In the seventeenth century, the Westminster divines defined providence accordingly: "God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy." (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 5, section 1) The Heidelberg Catechism, a document produced in 1576, asked and answered the same question; "What do you understand by the providence of God? Providence is the almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food, drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things in fact, come to us not by chance but from his fatherly hand."

4:2 is careful to emphasize the throne of God. For a people who would have been concerned about the power of the throne in Rome this section would provide needed assurance. Revelation employs the word *throne* 35 times (out of a total of sixty-two references in the NT). The book with the next highest number is Matthew with four uses of the word.

John's readers were familiar with earthly thrones, and they were troubled by all that Caesar's throne meant. John will not let them forget that there is a throne above every throne. (Morris, p. 86)

How can we make application to the American church at the turn of the millennium? Many evangelicals are concerned about the moral decay in Washington D.C. which became evident in the 1990s. What does this heavenly throne say to our situation?

4:3 List the images of verse 3. What is John's portrait of God trying to convey?

4:10 Here we meet the twenty-four elders for the first time in Revelation.¹ One commentator claims there are thirteen different views of the identity of these elders. It is probably best to see a reference to the complete people of God. The twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles, i.e., the people of the old covenant and the new covenant.

4:6b-8 describe *four living creatures*. Compare Ezekiel 1:5-25; Isaiah 6:3.

They, like the elders and angels, are heavenly creatures of the highest order involved with the worship and government of God. (Johnson, p. 463)

4:7 What are we to make of the descriptions of these four creatures? It seems John uses the "noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in animate Nature. Nature, including Man, is represented before the Throne, taking its part in the fulfilment of the Divine Will, and the worship of the Divine Majesty."²

¹ We find them referred to again in chapters 5, 11 and 19.

² From Henry Swete, cited in Morris, p. 91.

What is the role of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders? What do they do? On what basis do they offer their worship?

Skip ahead to the three songs in Revelation 5. What is the basis for worship in these songs? Do we have these two emphases in our worship?

John does something in Revelation 5 which is unique. He calls Jesus *the Lion of the tribe of Judah* (5:5). We find this expression, along with the phrase *the Root of David*, only here in the Bible. But notice the combination of these images of strength with weakness. When John turns to see this Lion what does he see (vs. 6)?

St. Augustine said, “Proud man would have died had not a lowly God found him.” Which side of God’s character drew you to Him? His strength (Christ the Lion) or his weakness (Christ the slain lamb)? In what ways was this side of God’s character appealing?

Revelation 4-5 are profound chapters about worship. These verses give us a glimpse of what we will do forever. When we worship we are rehearsing for eternity. Read and discuss the following quotation.

In worship God gathers his people to himself as center: “The Lord reigns” (Ps. 93:1). Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by spectres and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose. (Peterson, p. 60)

How does worship give us a “sustaining purpose”?

What are the “spasms and jerks” of your life which are corrected with weekly worship?

Describe your worship life (other than Sunday afternoons and homegroup sessions).

Chapter 5 concludes with the word “Amen.” The Message paraphrases 5:14,

The Four Animals called out, “Oh, Yes!” The Elders fell to their knees and worshiped.

We should say and do the same. *Oh, Yes!*

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Ten
Glorious Wrath
Revelation 6:1-17; 8:1-9:21; 16:1-21

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Ps. 13:1-2

We tend to find it easy to celebrate God's mercy and grace while we grimace a bit when we ponder his judgment and wrath.

Judgment is not something we normally long for. But if we are suffering unjustly in an evil social system, God's judgment—far from being a dreaded prospect—is our only hope. Like a wood plane that is used against the grain rather than with it, so wrath is how people opposing the rule of God will experience his grace. (Stevens, p. 25)

Indeed, the Old Testament prophets often celebrated God's coming judgment against the nations. The wrongs done to God's people will one day be vindicated. Ezekiel goes so far as to explicitly link God's judgment and his glory.

I will display my **glory** among the nations; and all the nations shall see my **judgment** that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, from that day forward.

Ezekiel 39:21-22

Revelation, a book which employs many of the images used by the prophet Ezekiel, also links these biblical themes.

Rev. 14:7 He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him **glory**, for the hour of his **judgment** has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."

As the title of this study guide suggests, Revelation is a book about the glory of God. In chapters 6 through 19 we see God's glory manifest primarily in the suppression of evil and unrighteousness. The persecuted church of Asia Minor must know that God will

have the last word over evil, that the suffering she is presently enduring is temporary at worst. God will rule, reign and vindicate his oppressed people.

In his book on Revelation, Eugene Peterson quotes a character from a novel who asks “the chief theological question of all time—‘What in the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?’”¹ Our chapters concerning God’s wrath provide John’s answer. God is in control. Evil and wickedness have boundaries.

We do not need Christ to tell us that the world is full of troubles. But we do need his explanation of history if its troubles are not to be meaningless. (Wilcock, p. 69)

Read Revelation 6:1-17; 8:1-9:21; 16:1-21. Fill in the blanks below as you read. Here we go! After ten weeks in the Apocalypse we are going to dive in to the rich imagery we have been looking forward to. Bruce Metzger comments:

With the sixth chapter, the main action of the book may be said properly to begin. The section extending from chapter 6 to the end of chapter 11 is intended to bring before the reader not only the struggle of the church amid conflict and persecution, but also the judgments of God upon the church’s enemies. (Metzger, p. 55)

To help clarify your understanding of these chapters fill in the blanks listed below as you read. Don’t try to interpret these symbols at the outset. Read them, enjoy them. Revelation is poetry.

Chapter 6

Seal # 1 _____

Seal # 2 _____

Seal # 3 _____

Seal # 4 _____

Seal # 5 _____

¹ Peterson, p. 72. The quotation is from Annie Dillard, Holy the Firm (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 60.

Seal # 6 _____

Which poetic phrase stood out to you in chapter 6?

Chapters 8-9

Seal # 7 _____

Trumpet # 1 _____

Trumpet # 2 _____

Trumpet # 3 _____

Trumpet # 4 _____

Trumpet # 5 _____

Trumpet # 6 _____

Trumpet # 7 (11:15) _____

What personal comfort did you find in the midst of the trumpet judgments in chapters 8-9?

Chapter 16

Bowl # 1 _____

Bowl # 2 _____

Bowl # 3 _____

Bowl # 4 _____

Bowl # 5 _____

Bowl # 6 _____

Bowl # 7 _____

Find a comforting verse or phrase in the midst of the bowl judgments in chapter 16.

Indeed, the wrath of God described in Revelation 16 is harsh. Notice, however, what comes before this vision of God's terrible judgment. Read Revelation 15:2-4. What does this tell us about our Lord?

Notes and Questions:

We could, but will not, write pages on the imagery which John uses in these four chapters.¹ These chapters contain dozens of allusions to the Old Testament. Let us strive to get a view of the whole. The backdrop of Revelation 6 is found in the opening verses of Revelation 5. John sees a scroll in the right hand of *him who sat on the throne*. John weeps because *no one in heaven or on earth . . . could open the scroll*. "The scroll is the

¹ The argument over identity of the rider on the white horse shows how difficult it is to interpret Revelation with precision. Some scholars see this as an image of Christ in his glory (Ladd and Peterson for example). Others see this rider as representative of the Antichrist (Caird, Mounce and Walvoord). Still others find an image of Prince Charles at a polo match (Jolley, Soifer et. al.). Hmm. . .

book of the eternal decrees of God.” (Metzger, p. 52) Revelation 6 shows the opening of these seals.

The first four of these seals describe the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. The image comes from Zechariah 6:1-5. What do you think each of the four horses stand for?

White horse =

Red horse =

Black horse =

Pale horse =

What are we to make of the events described in the six seals? Is Revelation telling us about the future? Or is John describing life between the two advents of Jesus? Consider the sixth seal (6:12ff). Compare this with Matthew 24:29-30. What is described in these verses? How does this inform our interpretation of the sixth seal?

Wilcock sees the close similarity between the sixth seal and Jesus’ description of his second coming in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. This leads him to understand the four horsemen to have been riding throughout history.

In the light of Matthew 24, then, we begin to see the over-all meaning of this scene of the drama. What does the future hold? Conquest and strife, scarcity and death; ‘but the end is not yet. . . all this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs’ (Mt. 24:6, 8). In view of the frequent misunderstanding which takes the ‘wars and rumors of wars’ passage to be a prediction of the end, it is worth stressing that that is precisely what Christ says it is not. The terrifying events of the first four Seals, which those who have to live through them might imagine to be signs of Christ’s return and of the close of the age (Mt. 24:3), are in fact commonplaces of history. The four horsemen have been riding out over the earth from that day to this, and will continue to do so. (Wilcock, p. 74)

Notice the similarity of the sixth seal, the seventh trumpet (11:5) and the seventh bowl of wrath (16:17-18). Each of these seems to bring us to the end, to the time of Christ's second coming.¹

What are the different responses to God's wrath in these chapters? Compare 6:9-11 with 6:15-17. What do you find?

Notice (8:1-5) that the content of the seventh seal is the seven trumpets. Is it safe to assume that the picture John paints is that of an intensifying outpouring of wrath. Read 9:20-21 and 16:21. What is the effect of God's wrath? Does it provoke those who receive it to repentance? What does this verse teach us about the effect sin has on the sinner?

Look over Revelation 16 again. Notice the similarities between the bowls of wrath and the plagues sent to Egypt (Exodus 7-12). What comfort could the reader of Revelation draw from this parallel? How were the Israelites affected by the plagues of Egypt? Note Revelation 7:3 and 9:4.

Much has been made of Revelation 16:16 in certain American evangelical circles. Here we find a reference to *Armageddon*. What does the writer have in mind? The word is a Hebrew word which could mean "Hill of Megiddo." The first readers would probably have thought back to Old Testament times when King Josiah and King Neco of Egypt fought a battle near the city of Megiddo (2 Kings 23:29). The defeat of Josiah led to the defeat of Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel) by the Babylonians.

There is a subtle portrayal by means of this place name of the balancing of the scales, so that this new Babylon—the Roman Empire—is to bear the judgment of God at the place where previously the old Babylon had been, in effect conqueror. But there is a larger context in this final judgment scene that goes beyond the

¹ "The question of whether the earthquake, the darkened sun, and so on, are to be taken literally or metaphorically, misses the point. That day will spell the end of the entire universe as we know it (Heb. 12:26), the end of the planets and galaxies as well as the end of the human institutions they may symbolize." (Wilcock, p. 73)

judgment of the Roman tyranny. That larger setting. . . is the judgment of the devil, his armies, and his followers. (Palmer, pp. 219-220)

What do we learn about God from the songs of Revelation 16:5-7?

The material studied in these chapters has probably been both clear and unclear. The seals, trumpets and bowls clearly teach that God's wrath will be the last word on evil and Satan. The details. . . well, the details prove that Revelation is a poetic prophecy.

What have you learned personally about God and his glory in this study? How has your vision of God been enlarged in these four chapters?

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Eleven

Living Through an Apocalypse

Revelation 7:1-17

John's apocalypse, if nothing else, tells the story of God's ultimate triumph over evil. The pages of this New Testament book ooze with God's sovereignty over history and his victory over Satan.

But what about the meantime? What assurance does the believer have between the first and second advents of Jesus? How dangerous are the "between times"? Peterson writes,

The question every person of faith must face is, Do God's love and redemption *work* in this history in which I live? (Peterson, p. 75)

Read Revelation 6 and 7 (thirty-four verses). Notice, in the context of 8:1, that Revelation 7 forms an interlude between the sixth and seventh seal. Jot down any initial thoughts you have as you read chapter 7.

R. H. Charles, a scholarly commentator on Revelation, calls chapter 7 one of the most difficult yet one of the most important in the entire book. Hanns Lilje calls this chapter "the most glorious of the entire Apocalypse."¹ You have just read the seventeen verses of chapter 7. Look over the chapter again. Scan the page. What do you think would prompt the above comments? What would a Revelation scholar call "difficult" in this chapter? Why would Lilje call the chapter "most glorious"?

¹ see Johnson, p. 477

As we work through Revelation chapter 7 be careful to allow John his normal elasticity. John's vision does not read like a newspaper report. Note the big picture. That which is described in Revelation 7 does not necessarily come chronologically after Revelation 6.

It is dangerous to assume that the order in which John writes is the order in which the things he describes will happen and here we have a notable example of that danger. For chapter 6 describes what is surely a 'harming of the earth'; yet 'after this' (7:1) we come to a vision in which the earth has not yet been harmed (7:3). Chapter 7 may follow chapter 6 in John's visions, but it does not seem to follow it in the order of actual events. (Wilcock, p. 78)

The *after this* of verse 1 refers to the timing of John's vision, not the order of events described.

So what is chapter 7 about? John is stressing the spiritual safety of the church throughout the ages. Believers are called to live though the apocalypse in faithfulness. This is one of the themes of Revelation. Read the following verses and observe this encouragement.

2:10

2:25-26

6:9-11

7:14 (see below)

14:2-5

16:15

Christian faith is anything but a guarantee of smooth sailing through the seasons of life. Persecution and trials are to be the expectation of the believer.¹

Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.

John 15:20

. . . [T]hey will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.

¹ Persecution of believers is not a relic of the first century church. James and Marti Hefley estimate that there have been more Christian Martyrs in the twentieth century than in all the other centuries combined. See *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* (Baker Books, 1996). World Christian Magazine estimates that 300,000 believers die annually for their faith in our era. In Sudan alone about a million believers have lost their lives in the past two decades. In the first four months of 1994, 300,000 Sudanese believers died of starvation due to a government induced famine.

Luke 21:12

While the believer is subject to no end of trouble in the present age, God has the last word, the believer is sealed and his or her destiny is secure.

We find this assurance in two visions.

7:1-8 contains the vision of the sealed multitude

7:9-17 contains the vision of the worshipping multitude

Notes and Questions:

Notice the main point of the first vision. God's people are *sealed*. Before going on in this study make a note of what comes to your mind with this word. What does it mean to be *sealed*? How does it feel to know you are sealed by God?

Who is sealed (7:3)?

Now consider the following verses. What do they add to your understanding of the *sealing* in Revelation 7:3?

Ezekiel 9:1-4 (also a vision)

Ephesians 1:13-14

Ephesians 4:30

The American church, as we have observed in this study, is largely exempt from serious persecution. Try to place yourself in Iran, Sudan, China or elsewhere. How would this notion of being sealed by God affect you? What is the difference from the way in which this image affects you as an American Christian?

7:4-8 identifies the *sealed* as 144,000 believers *from all the tribes of Israel*. What does John have in mind with this image? Does he mean, literally, that only 144,000 believers are sealed (while the rest go without God's seal)? Is John speaking of Jewish believers?

The 144,000 most likely is John's description of the church¹ throughout the ages, the people of God throughout the Old and New Testaments.² Peterson writes,

People who live by faith in Jesus Christ are protectively sealed against evil by the Spirit. St. John hears God's declaration of the total number—absolutely complete, not a single one missing, the all-inclusive 144,000 (12 squared, then multiplied). (Peterson, p. 84)

When John sees the multitude in the second vision (7:9-17) he sees a huge throng of saints which defies enumeration from a human point of view.

What, specifically, does the seal of God protect his people from? Look again at 7:1-3. Before the angels begin to dispense God's wrath his people must be sealed! John is making the same point here that Paul makes more simply in I Thessalonians 5:9.

For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The believer is exempt from God's wrath due to the blood of Jesus. The believer's eternal destiny is secure and thus the *great multitude* of 7:9-17 can worship in the midst of persecution with an irenic spirit of calm.

¹ Some have objected to identifying the "church" with the twelve tribes of Israel. Morris' answer to this objection seems definitive. "The church can be referred to as 'the twelve tribes' (Jas. 1:1; cf. Mt. 19:28, Lk. 22:30), and this is probably the thought when a letter is sent to 'the Dispersion' (1 Pet. 1:1, mg.). The Christian appears to be the true Jew (Rm. 2:29) and the church 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16). Descriptions of the old Israel are piled up and applied to the church (1 Pet. 2:9F.; cf. Eph. 1:11, 14). It is the church which is God's 'peculiar people' (Tit. 2:14), and Christ's own who are 'Abraham's seed' (Gal. 3:29) and 'the circumcision' (Phil. 3:3). . . .

"The view is thus widespread. Nor is it alien to John. He expresses it by implication when he speaks of those 'which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan' (2:9; cf. 3:9). He regards the new Jerusalem as the spiritual home of Christians (21:2, etc.), and it has on its gates the names of the twelve tribes (21:12). There is thus good reason for seeing a reference here to the church as the true Israel. Here is the church, sealed in view of the coming trials; later in the chapter it is the church triumphant and at peace." (Morris, p. 114)

² John specifies who the 144,000 are. Twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. But what are we to make of this list of tribes? First, we should note, Judah is listed first. The reason should be obvious: Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. Second, if our OT history is better than average, we notice that the tribe of Dan is missing. Why? There was a first century tradition that the Anti-Christ would arise from the tribe of Dan.

7:9-12 Re-read these verses. Why are these verses here? Do you feel this enthusiasm in your own response to what God has done for you?

7:14 is a rich verse. First, we find in most translations a reference to *the great tribulation*. The words could, and perhaps should, be translated, *great oppression*, or, *great affliction*.

Does John have in mind here the last seven years of history or is this his description of the entire church age? Our answer will probably be informed by our experience. Believers in Sudan, China etc. have been in *great tribulation* for most of their lives.

Second, the tense of the verbs used is significant. The saints *have washed* their robes in the blood of the Lamb. This verb is in the aorist tense (past tense) and refers to a definitive one-time action. The saints are secure in Christ. On the other hand, the verb which reads in the NIV *have come out of the great tribulation* is in the present tense. It should probably be translated *are coming out of the great tribulation*.

Wilcock writes,

Why do these stand before God's throne? What qualifies them to be there? The twin facts that they *have washed* their robes in the blood of the Lamb, and *do emerge* from suffering. He who is numbered among that multitude is the man who has been cleansed from his old life of sin (a past event) and been given an irrepressible new life which no tribulation can quench (a present experience). (Wilcock, p. 82)

How is it with your soul? Have you washed your robe? Do you have an "irrepressible new life"? Share with your group how this affects the state of your soul during this season of your life? What difference does the assurance of Revelation 7 make in your daily striving, working, resting, and playing?

7:15-17 What is characteristic of the believers who are before the throne? What are the promises to those in white robes? Which of these promises speaks most to your present need?

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was familiar with the threat of persecution. After he launched the Protestant Reformation he spent years living as an outlaw, hiding for his very life. Luther translated the Scriptures, preached and wrote books. He also wrote songs. His greatest hymn was a commentary on Psalm 46 called A Mighty Fortress Is Our God! It could have been based on Revelation 7.

Read the words of this hymn and praise God for his protective care over your life. Pray the prayers of Revelation 7 together as a group. “Salvation (victory) belongs to our God, who sits on the throne!” Celebrate!

A MIGHTY FORTRESS

A mighty fortress is our God a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing;
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side, the man of God's own choosing;
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, It is He;
Lord Sab-a-oth His name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.

And tho this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us;
We will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us
The Prince of Darkness grim, We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure, For lo his doom is sure,
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and the gifts are ours through Him who with us sideth;
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever.

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Twelve
Constant Cosmic Conflict
Revelation 12-13

Revelation 12-13 (35 verses) portray the conflict of the ages in startling relief. Here we meet a dragon with seven heads and beasts from the sea and the earth. We catch the Christmas story told in apocalyptic style. We see the havoc wreaked by Satan through history and his ultimate defeat along with his demonic angels. We learn the two *beasts* who opposes everything which is godly. Hang on! Chapters 12-13 take us on a wild ride.

Read these 35 verses. This should take just a few minutes. Consider as you read the characters presented. Which ones are identified (or interpreted) by John? What

is your initial interpretation of the un-identified characters? (No peeking at your study Bible notes.)

Character

Interpretation (?)

woman clothed with the sun

the male child

red dragon

beast of the sea

beast of the earth

Notes & Questions:

12:1 We are not told who the woman is. Three interpretations have been most popular. The woman is the Virgin Mary; the woman is OT Israel (which produced the Messiah); the woman is the church.

Wilcock argues for the latter when he writes,

. . . [S]he is adorned with the splendour of sun, moon, and twelve stars, which in a parallel Old Testament dream (Joseph's in Gn. 37:9-11) represent the whole family of Israel. What is more, she continues to exist even after Christ's ascension, and lives on for 'one thousand two hundred and sixty days', the whole period of church history from his first coming to his second.¹ She is in fact the church: the old Israel, 'the human stock from which Christ came. . . and the new Israel, whom he has now left in order to go back to his Father. . . (Wilcock, p. 119)

However we interpret *the woman* let us not miss what should be the obvious point of the passage. The birth of the Messiah is seen as a decisive moment of spiritual warfare. The birth of Jesus is the vortex of history. The dragon (Satan) made every effort to destroy the child (Matthew 2:1-16) and failed!

12:1-6 How do these verses change your perspective on what we call "Christmas?" How can the church celebrate this side of Christmas?

12:7-12 What do we learn about Satan from the *war in heaven* ?

¹ Repeatedly in Revelation we run across a time-frame of 3.5 years, 42 months, 1,260 days or a *time, times and a half a time* (Rev. 12:14). This latter description looks back to Daniel 7:25 and 12:7. Some interpreters see this time period referring to a literal time of tribulation before the return of Christ (usually the second half of a 7 year period). Others, such as Wilcock above, see this as a number describing the entire church age. Support for the understanding of this as a reference to the church age comes from comparing Revelation to Jesus' sermon on the last days. In Luke 21:20-24 Jesus speaks of *the times of the Gentiles* as beginning with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Compare this with Revelation 11:2 the outer court of the temple has been given to *the Gentiles* who will *trample on the holy city for 42 months*. "The figure becomes a symbol like the red cross or the swastika, a shorthand way of indicating the period during which the 'nations', the unbelievers, seem to dominate the world, but the 'people', God's people, maintain their witness in it." (Wilcock, p. 106)

12:10-11 Satan is called *the accuser* in verse 10. How are his accusations overcome in verse 11a? How can (or should) this truth affect our feelings of guilt for past sin? Compare Hebrews 10:22.

12:13-17 What is the dragon's response to his defeat? Don't try to make sense of all the imagery here (the earth opening its mouth, etc.). Concentrate on the big picture. What is being presented?

Taken together, chapters 12 and 13 present an un-holy trinity: the dragon along with two of Satan's emissaries, the beasts from the sea and the land. Before going on re-read 13:1b-4. What do you think John is portraying with these images?

As we saw above (page 49), Sir William Ramsey observes, "The shadow of the Roman empire broods over the whole of the Apocalypse." (Ramsay, p. 67) This shadow is, perhaps, most clear in Revelation 13. Consider a few emperors the readers of Revelation would have been familiar with:

Caligula (37-41 A.D.) insisted he be worshipped as divinity during his reign.

Nero (54-68 A.D.) was the most unstable and brutal of the emperors. He murdered his step-brother Brutiannicus (who should have been on the throne) after Claudius died), murdered his wife, and murdered his mother. Seneca, Nero's teacher, committed suicide. After Rome burned in 64 A.D. Nero ruthlessly persecuted the church.¹

¹ Besides being put to death, they were made to serve as object of amusement; they were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified; others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display and put on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, even towards men whose guilt merited the most exemplary punishment; for it was felt that they were being destroyed not for the public good but to gratify the cruelty of an individual. (Tacitus, *Annales*, xv. 44, cited in Palmer, p. 207)

Domitian (81-96 A.D.) was the fiercest persecutor of Christians and Jews. He demanded that his subjects address him as “Lord and God” (*dominus et deus noster* in Latin). When Christians and Jews refused him this homage his persecution was ruthless.

With this in mind, think through 13:1-9. How would a first-century reader have understood this beast?

What are the primary tasks of this beast?

What kind of authority does the beast wield over God’s people?

What do you think is the point of verses 9 and 10?

Michael Wilcock understands the first beast to be the state, or the government, which is opposed to God. He writes,

Now the dragon’s seven heads and ten horns showed that power was of his very essence. Of all the attributes of God, his omnipotence is what Satan aspires most to have. And the beasts of Daniel 7 (on which John’s prophecy seems to rely) are actually explained as being four great kings, or empires. . . In fact it is the very word we use to describe them—the ‘great powers’. So when we are shown a beast whose power is not that of wealth or of influence, but that of government (‘diadems’ and a ‘throne’), who combines all the powers of Daniel 7, and whose authority is worldwide (verse 7), we see in him the principle of power politics: in a word, the state.¹ For John this meant, of course, the Roman Empire; but every succeeding generation of Christian people knows some equivalent of it.² (Wilcock, pp. 123-124)

¹ How can this be in light of Romans 13:1 which reads, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”? While God establishes governments to provide law and an orderly society for his creatures, Satan has, once again, perverted that which is good. The state is a gift to counter-balance chaos. But when the state denies the higher authority of God totalitarianism and tyranny are generally the result. Lord Acton’s phrase has been experienced by countless multitudes. “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

² While Revelation 13 is, as usual, interpreted differently by those holding the different view of John’s book, even a futurist such as George Ladd seems to partially agree with Wilcock. “The beast then is the eschatological Antichrist who was foreshadowed in certain aspects of Rome, and in other totalitarian states as well.” (Ladd, p. 177)

Peterson calls these chapters “The last word on politics.”

Dragon, sea beast, and land beast are a satanic trinity that infiltrates the political world in order to deflect our worship from the God whom we cannot see to the authorities that we can see, and deceive us into buying into a religion or belief-system that has visible results in self-gratification. (Peterson, p. 127)

What parallels do you see between the work of these beasts and the work of Christ? Your list should be surprisingly thorough.

Counterfeit Work of the Beast

Genuine Work of Christ

The “American experiment” has produced a government unlike any other in history. Read the following quotation and think about our own state. In what ways is our state “kept in its place”? In what ways does our government function as the beast of Revelation 13? Are Christians who are politically involved (on either the right or the left) serving the beast?

Politics always competes with religion (joining it, tolerating it when it must, and absorbing it when it can) in order to promise, if not a life beyond, then a new deal on this earth, and a Leader smiling charismatically from the placards.

Eric Erickson¹

¹ John 2:18 reads,

¹ *Toys and Reasons* (New York, 1977), p. 91.

Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

If there is a specific or final antichrist who is to come shortly before the return of Jesus, Revelation 13:11ff. describes him. Look at these verses from this perspective. What kind of a person will the antichrist be?

Notice John's call for patience, endurance and wisdom in 13:10 and 18.

How do we protect ourselves from organized deceit? St. John is blunt; use your heads. Figure out what is going on. (Peterson, p. 126)

The number of the beast is 666, triple imperfection. At every point the beast falls short of God's perfection, but the beast is close. Without scrutiny the beast looks like a lamb (13:11).¹

In what ways are you making an effort to discern the times in which you live? Evaluate SBCC in this regard. Are we thinking both biblically and culturally as we wait for the return of our Lord? Explain your answer.

Peterson's observation forms an apt conclusion to our study.

Every community is set down in the middle of this conflict of politics. Christian communities of faith have St. John's vision by which to distinguish the politics of the dragon from the politics of the Lamb. We are in a crossfire of blustering dragon-pretension and powerful Lamb-meekness. They are equally concerned

¹ Some have tried to find a name referred to in the number 666. In both Greek and Hebrew letters were given a number. A = 1, B = 2, C = 3, etc. A good deal of energy has been expended on finding a name with the numerical equivalent of 666. Some suggestions? Mohammed, Cromwell, Martin Luther, Napoleon. In recent times American evangelicals have suggested Adolf Hitler, John Kennedy ("He will come back to life from his mortal head wound. . ."), Henry Kissinger and others. Perhaps the most popular name of the antichrist using numerical equivalents is that of Nero. His name, *Neron Caesar* apparently adds up to 666 if it is spelled in Hebrew (cf. Metzger, p. 77).

with the operation and use of power. We choose: we follow the dragon and his beasts along their parade route, conspicuous with the worship of splendid images, elaborated in mysterious symbols, fond of statistics, taking on whatever role is necessary to make a good show and get the applause of the crowd in order to get access to power and become self-important. Or we follow the Lamb along a farmyard route, worshipping the invisible, listening to the foolishness of preaching, practicing a holy life that involves heroically difficult acts that no one will ever notice, in order to become simply, our eternal selves in an eternal city. (Peterson, p. 132)

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Thirteen
The Wedding Supper of the Lamb
Revelation 17:1—19:10

The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers, mothers, husbands, wives or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams. But God is the ocean.

Jonathan Edwards¹

As believers we long to know God, to be in his presence, to care about nothing other than his glory. But, as C.S. Lewis observed, we are “half hearted creatures.” We find ourselves distracted with that which is second best. The newspaper demands our time, the television pumps out image after image that we cannot live without seeing. We settle for mountain climbing in Argentina, country music in Branson, Missouri, snorkeling in the waters of Hawaii. The clutter of life distracts us from God. The kid’s soccer game, the term paper which is due in three days, visiting my oncologist, shopping for groceries, waxing the car. . . These things, and thousands more, form what Anne Dillard called the “enormous temptation of life.” That is

. . . to diddle around making itsy-bitsy friends
and meals and journeys for itsy-bitsy years on end. . .

John, of course, is writing to believers who were concerned about their very survival. But their temptation was similar to ours: putting second things first and first things second.

Read Revelation 17:1 through 19:10. Concentrate on the first 10 verses of Revelation 19. What initial observations and questions come to mind as you read?²

¹ from “The Christian Pilgrim,” cited in John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, (Baker Book House, 1990), pp. 109-110.

² Other than the question we asked on page 57, “What in the Sam Hill is going on here anyway?”

Notes and Questions:

Chapters 17-18 We have seen the “shadow” of the Roman empire on the pages of John’s apocalypse. Chapters 17-18 show John’s delight in God’s sovereignty over that wicked empire. Think about the sheer arrogance of John’s prophecy. When he wrote Revelation, Rome was at the apex of her power. The nations of the world were subservient to the empire. World-wide hegemony was taken for granted. The power of Rome was absolute. The nation was impregnable.

Chapters 17 and 18 are a literary triumph of imaginative power. More than once John has found comfort for himself and his people by proclaiming the fall of Rome. So certain is he that God will judge the persecutors of the church that he now devotes two chapters to an account of the crashing down of the fabulous “grandeur that was Rome.” To say directly that God will destroy imperial Rome would have been, of course, altogether treasonous in the eyes of the imperial authorities. So, like a prisoner writing in code from a concentration camp, John characterized the power of evil as Babylon. Just as Babylon represented to the Hebrews all that was wicked and symbolized persecution, so for John Rome was another Babylon, the source and fountainhead of all seductive luxury and vice, living in voluptuous materialism and selfishness. (Metzger, p. 85)

Four centuries after John wrote these chapters Rome was in shambles, never to recover from the invasion of the Goths who burned the city to the ground.

In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin (18:17)

While John certainly has historical Rome in mind in these chapters, “Babylon” is a symbol for the idolatry of the state.

Babylon is allegorical of the idolatry that any nation commits when it elevates material abundance, military prowess, technological sophistication, imperial grandeur, racial pride, and any other glorification of the creature over the Creator. In these chapters we have an up-to-date portrait of what may occur when we idolize the gross national product, worship growth, and become so preoccupied with quantity that we ignore quality. (Metzger, p. 88)¹

¹ Jacques Ellul wrote a major study of the role of the “city” in Scripture. The city, he shows, is the place of human power, the place where God is unnecessary. “[W]hen Revelation takes a city [Babylon] as the symbol of the human power to be destroyed, that also is not due to any accident. It is not because the

Look over these chapters a second time. Where do you think John is specifically talking about the Roman empire? What verses seem to point to earthly power, or the state which supplants the role of God in our lives?

Read 1 John 2:15-17. Here the world is the equivalent to Babylon in Revelation, that is, human society without God.

In what ways are you tempted to trust in the world? In what areas do you love the world? How can your homegroup pray for you in this regard?

19:1-10 Notice the sharp contrast in these verses from the visions of chapters 17-18 and 19. Four times we find the word *Hallelujah* (19:1, 3, 4, 6). Believe it or not, this is the only place we find this word in the New Testament. John is inserting a bit of Hebrew into his Greek book. He takes two Hebrew words *halal* = to praise and *Jah* = Yahweh. When we say “Hallelujah,” we are not uttering a religious cliché. To the contrary, “hallelujah” is both a command (“praise God”) and an exultation (“praise God”). With a single word we declare the greatness of God and his worthiness to be praised.

Read what follows the four Hallelujahs of Revelation 19. Why is God worthy of our praise? How do these verses correspond to chapters 17 and 18?

Notice the parallel trio of voices. In Revelation 18 the kings (18:9-10) the merchants (18:11-17) and the seafarers (18:17-20) lament the fall of Rome. Look for the three corresponding songs of praise in 19:1-5. Who are the singers of these songs?

historical circumstances made Rome the center of the Empire, but rather because in her all human civilization is symbolized and summed up. She is the sum of man’s spiritual effort, she represents not only the city but the condemned power behind the city.” *The Meaning of the City* (Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 48-49.

19:6-10 bring us to the wedding of the bride (the church) and the bridegroom (Christ). In a sense we could see this as the climax of the story told in Scripture. Adam and Eve are separate from God by virtue of sin. The long story here comes to its conclusion. God's people are finally united in marriage (the most intimate metaphor possible) with the God who has loved them through the ages.

Read the following Scripture passages (at least one of them will be shocking). Notice the way Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea and Paul use the metaphor of marriage to characterize God's relationship with his people. What does each of these passages teach you about God and his love for his people? How do they illumine Revelation 19? (Those more experienced in the Bible will need to come prepared to help the newcomer to the Old Testament understand these verses.)

- Isaiah 54:1-8
- Ezekiel 16:1-15ff.
- Hosea 2:1-9ff.
- Ephesians 5:25-32

Now, in Revelation 19, we read of the great wedding and marriage supper of the Lamb and the bride. Think through Revelation to this point. What has prepared the bride (the church) to be ready for the wedding?

Why is "marriage" such a powerful metaphor for the end? Why is this a good image for the believer's hope?

Notice the contrast between the prostitute's attire and the bride's wedding gown. Compare 17:4 with 19:7-8. In what ways are you preparing for your wedding?

In our time and culture a man and a woman become “engaged” before their wedding. The engagement is a time to plan the wedding, find housing and get to know your future in-laws. An engagement is easily terminated without shame or social recrimination. In the first century world couples were betrothed. This was as good as being married in the eyes of the community. Recall Joseph’s reaction when he found out Mary was pregnant. Though they were only *betrothed* Joseph *he had in mind to divorce her quietly* (Matt. 1:19).

The church is *betrothed* to her Lord. She is as good as married, though still waiting for the marriage ceremony. Re-read the quotation by Jonathan Edwards at the beginning of this study. Revelation 19 describes the time when we will be most satisfied in God.

19:9 Looks forward to a feast, *the wedding supper of the Lamb*. The Old Testament background for a future feast is found in Isaiah 25:6.

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines.

We rehearse this coming feast week by week when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper.

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

Luke 22:14ff.

Celebrate the Lord’s Supper as a homegroup. Worship the Lamb of God as you look forward to the wedding feast which is still to come.

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Fourteen

The Last Battle

Revelation 19:11—20:15

The Old Testament prophets longed for “the day of the Lord.” The day when Messiah would come, vindicate God’s people and bring the wrath of Yahweh on the unbelieving nations which oppressed Israel. Isaiah 61:1-2 is one example of such prophetic thinking.

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me to
preach good news to the poor. He has sent
me to bind up the brokenhearted, to
proclaim freedom for the captives and
release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God. . .¹

Centuries later Jesus used this very prophecy to begin his own ministry in his home town Nazareth.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:16-21)

Notice what Jesus did with the Isaiah prophecy. He cut Isaiah’s prediction in two! Jesus came to proclaim *the Lord’s favor*. The *day of vengeance* will arrive at the second advent of Christ. The church lives in *the year of the Lord’s favor*, while she waits for the day of God’s wrath. We have seen this theme repeatedly in our study of Revelation. In coming to John’s prophecy we come to his vision of the end. The time when God’s wrath will be dispensed upon the ungodly, his people will be rescued from their persecutors and Satan’s defeat will be complete.

¹ Compare Isaiah 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3; Joel 1:15, 2:1, 31; Amos 5:18 etc.

Revelation 19 through 21 provide the reader with seven more visions which testify to God's glorious sovereignty. Each vision is introduced with the words *I saw*.

1. First Vision: (19:11-16) The Rider on a White Horse
2. Second Vision (19:17-18) The Great Supper of God¹
3. Third Visions (19:19-21) The Doom of the Beast and the False Prophet
4. Fourth Vision (20:1-3) The Binding of Satan
5. Fifth Vision (20:4-10) The Reign With Christ
6. Sixth Vision (20:11-15) The Great White Throne Judgment
7. Seventh Vision (21:1-8) The New Jerusalem

Read Revelation 19:11—20:15 (six of the seven visions described above). What comes to your mind as you read these verses? How would you summarize John's visions in one or two sentences. Pretend your homegroup has a new member who shows up and thought

¹ The content of this vision, along with some of the other visions is exceedingly grisly. Virtually all commentators agree that John is using highly symbolic language in these verses. Metzger sees the vision containing "almost repellent realism." "Now the final, great conflict between good and evil takes place. "The beast and the kings of the earth with their armies" (19:19) come face to face with Christ and his followers. This immensely critical moment has been in John's view from the beginning, and we might have expected to read the details of how the battle went, with its different phases and critical moments. But the man of Patmos makes no statement about the battle, which is evidence that he intends to describe not an earthly military campaign but a spiritual struggle. He portrays only the result—the overwhelming defeat of the enemies of Christ." (Metzger, p. 92)

We would expect this interpretation of Bruce Metzger for it is in concert with his interpretation of Revelation. But, surprisingly, Alan Johnson, a futurist who tries at most points to interpret Revelation as literally as possible, takes the same view. "There seems to be only one actual battle described in Revelation. Thus these further scenes may be understood as more judicial in character than as literal battlefield descriptions. Because of John's christological reinterpretation, no great eschatological military battle. . . will actually be fought. The decisive battle has already been won at the Cross. These armies and the beast are the destroyers of the earth (11:18), who ultimately are the satanic principalities of the world who ally themselves with the human puppets for their idolatrous ends. These have been positionally defeated at the Cross (Col 2:15), but they will finally be stripped of all power at Christ's return." (Johnson, p. 576)

“Revelation” referred to a new brand of perfume. Summarize these visions for that person. Read these summaries as a group.

Notes and Questions:

19:11ff. shows with vivid imagery the coming warrior Messiah. Note the description of Jesus. Who is this Messiah? What does it mean to you that Jesus is *Faithful, and True*? What does the justice of Jesus mean to you?

As we noted above, Messiah was to bring *the day of the Lord*. Compare the following verses. Does the American church have an appropriate emphasis of this side of Jesus’ second coming? Do the teachers of Santa Barbara Community Church emphasize this properly?

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10

Matthew 25:41-43

19:12 Jesus wears *many crowns* on his head. The picture may seem strange, but in the first century it was common for a monarch to wear the crowns of those kingdoms under his authority.

19:13 contains a powerful image we might miss. The conquering Messiah’s robe has blood on it. Whose blood is it?

[I]s Christ's blood-dipped robe red from his enemies' blood or from his own blood? There are good reasons for accepting the latter. If the blood is his enemies', how is it that Christ comes from heaven with his robe already dipped in blood before any battle is mentioned? Furthermore, the blood that is always mentioned in connection with Christ in the Apocalypse is his own life-blood (1:5; 5:6, 9; 7:14; 12:11). (Johnson, p. 574)

What does this teach us about Jesus?

19:15 contains three Old Testament images which are presented in rapid succession. What do each of these teach us about Jesus?

Image	Old Testament Background	Lesson about Jesus
<i>Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.¹</i>	Isaiah 11:4 (see also Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16)	
<i>"He will rule them with an iron scepter."</i>	Psalm 2	
<i>He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.</i>	Isaiah 63:1-6 (See also Rev. 14:19-20)	

Mounce draws attention to the undeniable fact that God's wrath is coming. Commenting on the third of these images in 19:15 he writes,

¹ It is interesting to note that in Revelation the sword is usually in the Messiah's mouth! Commentators point out there is no exact OT parallel. "Christ conquers by the power of his word." (Johnson, p. 575)

Once again we meet the stern reality of the “fierce anger of God”. . . The two nouns translated “wrath” or “anger” are found thirteen times in chapters 6 through 19. Any view of God which eliminates judgment and his hatred of sin in the interest of an emasculated doctrine of sentimental affection finds no support in the strong and virile realism of the Apocalypse. (Mounce, p. 347)

20:1-10 Before going on in this study answer the following. What do these verses say? This is the easy part. . .

Who is the dragon?

What happens to Satan?

What is the stated purpose of this?

Who sits on the thrones? (vs. 4)

What happens when the thousand years are over? (vs. 7)

How are we to interpret these verses? To say Revelation 20 is a hotbed of dispute for those seeking to interpret this book would be an understatement. Wilcock surely speaks the truth when he writes,

We come in this Scene to one of the most difficult, or at any rate one of the most disputed, parts of the book. See what your commentator has to say about Revelation 20, and you will get a good idea of his approach to the rest. (Wilcock, p. 175)

What do we do with Revelation 20:1-10? Entire schools of New Testament interpretation stem from these ten verses.¹ Or perhaps we should put it the other way. The way we interpret the rest of the Bible will lead to our interpretation of these verses.

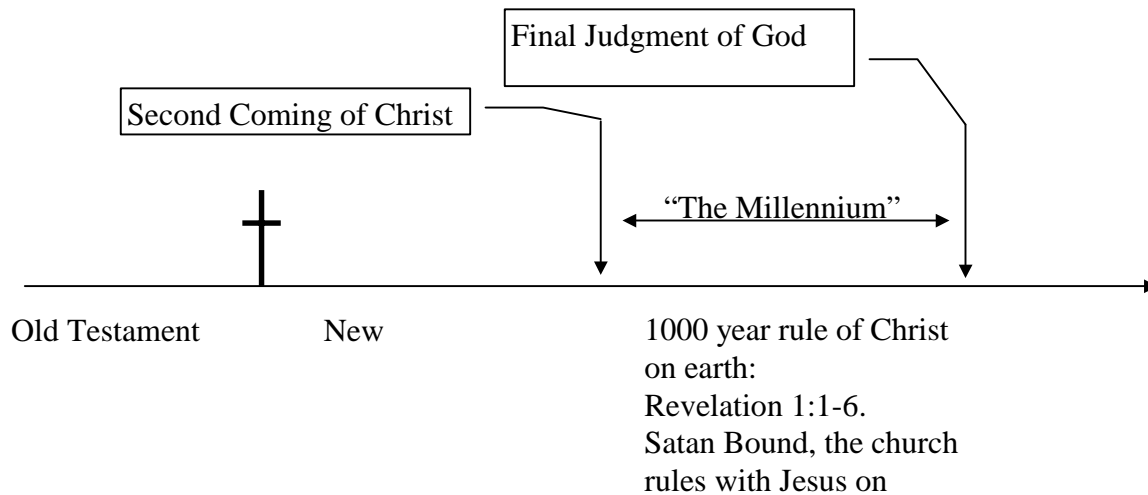
Some interpreters of Revelation would see these visions as a chronicle of the future describing the end of history. This school of interpretation, called **premillennialism**,² has been very popular in the American church during the twentieth century. If you are

¹ We might add that entire denominations divide over the issue. Our own Jonathan Wilson grew up as a Free Will Baptist (a eighteenth century denomination which arose in opposition to the “Regular Baptists”). The Free Will Baptists are premillennial in the churches east of the Mississippi and amillennial in the churches west of the Mississippi. Dr. Wilson remains uncommitted to this day. When asked about his position on the millennium he was recently heard to say, “Who me? My kayak is just floatin’ down stream until the end comes. . .”

² “The word *millennium* is a Latin term which means one thousand years.” (Metzger, p. 94)

reading a study Bible, chances are that premillennialism is assumed in the notes of that Bible.

The scheme could be diagrammed as follows:



A second group of interpreters are called **postmillennialists**. These believe that the church will spread the gospel to the whole world and that the world will be converted, more or less, before Jesus comes again. Hence, Jesus returns after the millennium. Many if not most of the Puritans who came to the thirteen colonies were postmillennialists seeking to establish the kingdom of God on earth.

A third group of interpreters are called **amillennialists**.¹ These understand Revelation 20 in still another way. The “millennium” of 20:1-6, describes the church-age. Satan has been bound by Christ by virtue of his work on the cross.

Robert Strimple speaks for many when he writes,

[T]he New Testament emphasizes two climatic points in Christ’s victory over Satan: victory at the cross and victory at his second coming. We must ask, then: Is that two climax structure preserved in Revelation 20:1-10? Or do we have introduced here a new feature that requires a significant revision of that basic New Testament perspective? Are we now to adopt an outlook that sees *three* climactic focal points: (1) victory at the cross and the resurrection; (2) victory at Christ’s

¹ This study-guide has, for the most part, been written from an amillennial perspective.

second coming and the inauguration of his millennial reign; and (3) a final victory at the end of the Millennium?¹

From the amillennialist perspective the seizing and binding of Satan (20:2) is John's way of saying what other New Testament writers have already said about the defeat of the devil on the cross.

Compare the following NT passages. What do they imply about the binding of Satan?

- Matthew 12:28-29
- John 12:31
- Colossians 2:15
- Hebrews 2:14-15
- 1 John 3:8

Strimple continues,

At the cross Satan is bound—but not absolutely. Revelation 20:2-3 does not say that Satan is bound, period. He is bound in one respect only, namely, “to keep him from deceiving the nations [the Gentiles] anymore.” The age of salvation for the Gentiles has arrived.²

Which of these views makes most sense to you? Which are the Scriptures which inform your opinion?

¹ from Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond, ed. By Darrell Bock (Zondervan, 1999), p. 123. Two other studies on the main views of the millennium are, The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views ed. By Robert Clouse (IVP, 1979) and The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options by Stanley Grenz (IVP, 1992). Serious students might even want to work through It'll All Work Out in the End by Reed Jolley (SBCC Publications, 1856).

² *Ibid.*

Regardless of your opinion of the millennium, think of the possible advantages and disadvantages of each position to one's devotional life. What are the dangers of each millennial position? How might each position encourage us in our faith?

Position	Possible encouragement	Possible danger
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Premillennialism

Postmillennialism

Amillennialism

Santa Barbara Community Church is a church which celebrates and longs for the second coming of Christ. Accordingly there is no "official" church position on the millennium. We believe Christ is coming again! Period. How the details work out make for great discussion and perhaps heated dialogue.¹ But the main thing must remain the main thing! Jesus is coming and he is coming soon. If we agree on this our fellowship will be sweet regardless of how we might differ in our understanding of these passages.

For many the very idea of "different" interpretations of a given portion of Scripture is troubling. As you conclude your homegroup discussion be sure to focus on the wonderful truth of our passage. The victory is the Lord's! Satan is defeated (past and future). His people will reign with God in glory!

This promise of the thousand-year reign must be honored and gratefully received by the Christian. . . We should stand back with respect and wonder at the sheer scale and extent of the promise. The details of this destiny shall be fulfilled and worked out according to God's will, and it is enough that Christians realize that we shall have tasks and work to do after the first boundary of our earthly pilgrimage. We shall be with Jesus Christ, and we shall reign with Him. (Palmer, pp. 236-237)

Worship God as a homegroup as you wait to find out the details of his coming. . .

¹ G. K. Chesterton said, "Those who get angry are those who have never learned to argue properly."

Sermon Notes. . .

Study Fifteen

All Things New

Revelation 21-22

Bernard of Cluny was a monk in the twelfth century. As he surveyed life in his monastery, he saw mainly corruption, jealousy, gossip, hypocrisy and scandal. This led to his writing a 3,000 line poem satirizing the monastery and castigating its worldliness. But toward the end of *Di Contemptu Mundi* (The Contempt of the World) Bernard turned his attention toward heaven. He longed to go there. He longed for that place which would be free from sin, saturated with grace and illumined by God's glory. Ponder a few of his lines.

Jerusalem the golden,
 With milk and honey blest!
Beneath thy contemplation
 Sink heart and voice oppressed.
I know not, O I know not
 What joys await us there:
What radiancy of glory,
 What bliss beyond compare.

O sweet and blessed country,
 The home of God's elect!
O sweet and blessed country
 That eager hearts expect!
Jesu, in mercy bring us
 To that dear land of rest:
Who art, with God the Father
 And Spirit, ever blest.¹

As we read, enjoy and worship our way through these final chapters of John's apocalypse, our hearts should burn within us as we catch a glimpse of what God has in store for us. If these chapters don't ignite a flaming passion for heaven something is desperately wrong in our soul. In 1 Corinthians 2:9 Paul says we don't really know what heaven will be like. We haven't arrived yet.

“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”

Revelation 21-22 are the closest we will get “seeing” what God has in store for his people. In these chapters we catch a preliminary glimpse of what is in store for us.

Read these chapters. Make a note of those verses which excite you. Share these verses with your group. Don't press the imagery. Enjoy. Wonder. Marvel. Praise.

¹ Cited in Metzger, p. 101.

Notes and Questions:

In many ways these chapters form the conclusion not only to the book of Revelation but to the entire Bible. The Old Covenant did not turn out too well. The promise made early in Israel's history did not come to fruition in the earthly city of Jerusalem.

I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. (Leviticus 26:11-12)

God blessed Israel but the nation repeatedly responded by lapsing into idolatry. The prophets (Isaiah—Malachi in the OT Bible) warned the nation to repent. Israel did not repent. The prophets then foretold the future judgment of God. But each of the prophetic books contain a note of hope. In the future, God will restore his blessing not only on Israel but on all the nations.

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. (Isaiah 65:17-19)

21:1 The word “new” is significant. John could have used one of two Greek words here. The normal word for “new” is *neos* (νεος). This word signifies “what was not there before,” or, what has only just arisen or appeared.” But John uses a different word, *kainos* (καινος). This refers to “what is new in nature, different from the usual, impressive, better than the old, superior in value or attraction.” (Kittle, vol. 3, p. 447) In other words, John is not predicting a series of heavens and earths. This is God's final restoration of his creation.

21:1-8 Scan these verses. What is specifically “new” about the *new heaven and earth*? Share your list with your group. How will “heaven” be different from the present era. What makes heaven and earth new?

21:3-4 Look carefully at this verse. This is the second time God himself speaks in Revelation. How does this verse bring to a conclusion the story of the Bible (Hint: think about Genesis 2-3)?

A question our children are not afraid to ask is: “Will heaven be boring?” Based on these verses (and these chapters) how would you answer this question? What will we do in heaven? (See 22:3) Why is it that we might be tempted to think of heaven as dull or boring?

21:2 Again we can note the elasticity of John’s vision. The city *is* the bride. There is much we should think about with regard to the *new Jerusalem*.

- **21:2** First, its identity. The New Jerusalem is identified with the church, the people of God (see especially 21:9-10). Ponder the words of Michael Wilcock.

. . . Christian readers must remind themselves that the bride, the city, is none other than the church of Christ. The churches of John’s day, the churches of our own day, all of us are looking into a mirror in these verses. We are not merely spectators—we are ourselves the spectacle: it is we who are ‘God’s building’ (I Cor. 3:9). The city shown to us here is what we shall be in the age to come, what in a sense we already are, on the level of ‘the heavenlies’, and what in our earthly experience God is presently making of us. (Wilcock, p. 207)

- **21:1-2** Second, its location. The new Jerusalem is not a coastal town like several of the towns which housed the seven churches of Revelation. [*T*]here was no longer

any sea. Why would John include this comment? Are surfers and sailors out of luck in the age to come?

In Jewish literature the ocean was a symbol for chaos, confusion and evil.¹ At the consummation these things will be a distant memory.

We should also note that the city is *always coming down*. Read Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10. Caird has some fun with this image. The New Jerusalem is a “descending-from-heaven kind of city.” (Caird, p. 257). Johnson says the perpetual descent “stresses the idea that the city is a gift from God, forever bearing the marks of his creation.” (Johnson, p. 593)

- **21:11-14** Third, its splendor. What is the most striking fact in this description of the New Jerusalem’s beauty?
- **21:15-20** Fourth, its shape. The city is envisioned as a cube.

It is no ordinary city. Its cube-like dimensions are clearly symbolic. It is highly relevant to remember that the central feature of Old Testament worship is a cube, the Holy of Holies, but whereas only one man was eligible once a year to enter there, now the whole community is placed within the cube. The eschatological significance is unavoidable. At the last, in spite of the problems arising from the conflict with evil, God’s plans work out triumphantly in the perfection of his people.²

- **21:15-20** Fifth, its size. The entire temple built by Solomon contained 2,700 cubic feet. It was surprisingly small. The New Jerusalem contains 3,225,000 cubic miles!

It should be obvious by now that John doesn’t intend to give us an architectural blue print of heaven. The size of the city is meant to shock the reader. The puny tabernacle/temple of the Old Testament has become the vast city of the new order!

- **21:22-27** Sixth, its deficit. What is missing from the *New Jerusalem*?
- **22:1-2** Seventh, its irrigation. The heavenly city has a river flowing through it *from the throne of God and of the Lamb*. Certainly this brings to mind God’s original creation. The garden of Eden was irrigated by a single river (Gen. 2:10). Throughout the Old and New Testaments water became a symbol for God’s Spirit. When the day of the Lord arrived the Spirit would be poured out on all of God’s people. One day

¹ See Job 38:8-11; Psalm 89:9; Isaiah 57:20. Note the first beast come from the sea (13:1).

² From *The Relevance of John’s Apocalypse* by Donald Guthrie (Eerdmans, 1987), p. 90.

living water would flow from Jerusalem. Read the following verses. Notice how Revelation 21 fulfills these prophecies.

Ezekiel 47:1-12

Zechariah 14:8-9

- **22:2-5** Eighth, its produce. Why did Adam and Eve have to leave the Garden of Eden after they sinned against God? Read the following:

And the LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. (Gen. 3:22-23)

What do the people of the *New Jerusalem* eat? Again, notice how this completes the story of the Bible.

Perhaps the most stunning feature of these chapters is found in 22:4: *They will see his face*. In the Ancient Near East to see the face of a King was to have an audience with him. The sight of the king's face was a deep privilege. When Pharaoh grew frustrated with Moses he said, *Get out of my sight! Make sure you do not appear before me again! The day you see my face you will die.* (Exodus 10:28)

Later Moses asks to see the very glory of Yahweh. God says, essentially, “I’ll show you a little bit, but not too much. . . [Y]ou cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” (Exodus 33:20).

Paul longed to see God more clearly.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

With the *New Jerusalem* all things have indeed been made new. The fellowship between God and his people, severed in the Garden, restored at the cross, is now fully realized as the end comes.

Look over these two chapters one more time. Note John's earnest desire to see the non-believing reader submit his or her life to the coming Lamb. How many invitations to "come" do you find? What is required to enter this holy city (cf. 21:6-7; 27; 22:12, 14)? How could someone meet these requirements?

Think back over the fifteen weeks of our study in this magnanimous book. Has your vision of God and his glory grown more clear. Do you yearn to sit at his feet singing the praises contained in this book? Has John's Revelation become your vision?

Perhaps a good conclusion and to our study of Revelation comes from a children's story. The seventh book of the Narnia tales by C.S. Lewis looks forward to the revelation of God's glory. Read and enjoy.

And as he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page; now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.¹

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, (Macmillan, 1956), p. 173.

Sermon Notes. . .