

2010–2011 *Horizons* Bible Study

Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today

Main Points Outline

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The material in this Main Points Outline is pulled from each lesson of the 2010–2011 *Horizons* Bible study, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*. Each portion will provide you with a brief outline that covers the main points of each lesson. In some instances, there are direct quotes from the lessons—these are identified with Bible study page references. In other instances, there are summaries on a larger scale to help condense lesson content. For participants who may not have had time to read the entirety of the lesson for each meeting, this outline will be very helpful. It will also help leaders identify some of the key points to highlight at each meeting. May this outline empower you as you participate and/or lead the *Revelation* study!

Introduction

The key themes in the introduction are **hope, praise, and journey**. We are also given **Guiding Principles** that will enable us to read *Revelation* with increased understanding.

1. *Revelation* is one of the most difficult books of the Bible, full of mysterious symbolism. Its twenty-two chapters can be intimidating, so it is important for readers to know that the message of *Revelation* is, most of all, one of **hope**. Hope is the message that has sustained countless Christians in situations of tyranny and oppression throughout the ages. The vision of hope in *Revelation* also speaks to us today (p. 3).

2. *Revelation* is rich in songs of **praise** to God and Jesus. No other book of the Bible has inspired so many of the hymns we know best—from “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” (*Rev. 4:8–11*) and Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus (*Rev. 19:6, 16; 11:15*) to African American spirituals. It is a wonderfully Christ-centered book, full of praise (p. 3).

3. *Revelation* takes us on a **journey** into the heart of God’s own dream for our world. A journey of radical hope and transformation, *Revelation* takes us back in time 2,000 years to get to know the struggling churches in the cities of the Roman Empire. This journey ultimately leads us, through a series of visions, to the throne of God (p. 3).

4. **Guiding Principles** (p. 4)

- Always keep in mind the historical context.
- Recognize that a range of possible interpretations of *Revelation* are in play, but that it’s not “anything goes.”
- Take the opportunity to look beyond the literal approach.
- Embrace the message of hope instead of fear.
- Read *Revelation* in community.
- Explore the sense of urgency for God’s realm.

Lesson One

An Apocalypse, an Author, and a Witness

This lesson consists of three sections: one having to do with **the three forms of literature** mentioned in *Rev. 1:1–3*, one section dealing with **John of Patmos**, and a final section describing John’s message about **the importance of witness**.

1. The Bible contains different types of literature. Knowing what to expect from each type of writing helps us understand how to read each book with deeper insight. **Three styles of writing** are utilized in *Revelation 1:1–3*: **apocalypse**, **prophecy**, and **letter**. All of these types of writing would have been familiar to the first-century audience that heard or read *Revelation* (p. 7).
 - **Apocalypse:** *Revelation* is the only book in our Bible that calls itself an apocalypse. Although many people associate the word with end-times disaster or destruction, the root meaning is simply “unveiling,” or “revelation.” (pp. 7–8).
 - **Prophecy:** *Revelation* also is prophecy. This word is first used in *Revelation 1:3*. But *prophecy*, in this usage, is not a prediction of the future. In the tradition of the biblical prophets, prophecy in the book of *Revelation* means proclaiming God’s message of salvation and judgment at a crucial moment in history. Prophets spoke truth to power and denounced injustice. Prophets opened people’s eyes to see the world in terms of God’s vision (pp. 8–9).

- **Letter:** Paul wrote letters to churches when he could not visit in person, and that seems to be the situation of the author of *Revelation*. The human sender is “John,” but he makes clear that he is not writing for himself but on behalf of God, who gave him the revelation of Jesus Christ (p. 9).
- 2. Who John of Patmos Is:** a follower of Jesus Christ, who was located on the island of Patmos—sixty miles off the coast of modern Turkey—writing at the close of the first century AD. His background is likely Jewish. A “seer”, John saw Jesus in a vision—a vision filled ultimately with important words of both warning and hope. John feels called by God to communicate what he sees to the seven churches of Asia Minor. **Who John Is Not:** John the Baptist; John the Apostle; the author of the gospel of John. (pp. 9–10)
- 3. The Importance of Witness:** One of *Revelation*’s main goals is to inspire and encourage Christians to become witnesses, just as Jesus was a faithful witness. John wants his readers (including us) to have the courage of uncompromising witness to God’s way of life, even in the face of hardship (pp. 10–11).
- The bold political witness that God’s reign trumps that of Rome, and that Rome’s unjust empire is coming to an end, is proclaimed throughout every chapter of *Revelation* (p. 11).
 - *Revelation* is about shaping the identity of the Christian churches John is addressing. They are to be a people of God, living by a different creed than that of Roman culture (p. 11).

The message of *Revelation* is a message of God’s love. It is also a wake-up call. Divine love is what motivates the urgency of *Revelation* (p. 12).

Lesson Two

Seven Letters to Seven Churches

John of Patmos addresses a series of letters to the early Christian communities of Asia Minor (circa 96 AD). The seven letters are like performance reviews of each church. These communities were grappling with issues such as Christians' relationship to the dominant culture, questions of wealth and poverty, and relationships with Jewish communities. John's goal is to persuade these churches not to blend in with their culture but to remain faithful witnesses to Jesus. John also seeks to give them hope (p. 15).

Eavesdropping on Ephesus and the Other Churches

John employs a pattern with each letter: He begins with a description of Jesus, followed by a performance review of each church. Next, he issues a call for repentance. Finally, he delivers a promise to the "conqueror" receiving the letter. All seven churches are able to listen in on the diagnosis of each others' conditions (pp. 15–16).

First Church of Ephesus (pp. 16–17)

- Ephesus was the largest city of the seven and was closest to the island of Patmos.
- John emphasizes that Jesus is alive and watching over each church, and that it is Jesus' message that comes to each church, not John's.
- The church at Ephesus receives high praise for its "patient endurance" (*Rev. 2:2*) and the strict theological standards it applies when attacking false teachers. But John chides the church because its members have forgotten to love one another.

Second Church of Smyrna and Sixth Church of Philadelphia (pp. 17–18)

- In John’s time, the church of Smyrna was economically poor and Philadelphia was powerless. Both were suffering opposition from their neighbors.
- Both churches win heartfelt praise and no blame at all.
- John emphasizes that Jesus himself experienced suffering and death, and thus is able to walk alongside them in their current experiences of poverty and exclusion.
- These two letters also introduce the question of the relationship of Christians to Judaism. We cannot know the specific areas of conflict with Jewish communities in these two cities, but John’s criticism should be viewed as a sibling dispute within different branches of the Jewish family—not as anti-Judaism.

Third Church of Pergamum (p. 18)

- Jesus’ urgent message to this church is that it must not compromise or accommodate itself to Roman culture.
- John takes a hard line on food issues because meat sold in city markets would have first been sacrificed to pagan gods. For Christians wishing to participate in banquets or trade guilds, such a strict line meant social marginalization.
- A rival teacher was apparently advocating a more lenient position on eating meat, and John attacks this leader for teaching Christians to “practice fornication,” probably a metaphorical reference to idolatry. John wanted his readers to avoid the “fornication” of participating in patriotic acts of worshiping the empire.

Fourth Church of Thyatira (p. 19)

- The fourth letter is the only one that refers to “all the churches” (*Rev. 2:23*).
- Thyatira was a commercial city. Its many trade guilds may have included a few well-off Christians who wanted to participate in civic life.
- John is furious that a *female* rival leader permits Christians to eat meat sacrificed to pagan gods. John labels this prophet “Jezebel”—not her real name, but a pejorative link to the queen of Israel who promoted pagan worship. John uses sexual innuendo to vilify this woman. Yet the activity he condemns is not sexual at all. It is idolatry—worship of the emperor and the empire.

Fifth Church of Sardis and Seventh Church of Laodicea (pp. 19–20)

- Sardis and Laodicea are the two churches that receive no praise, only blame.
- Laodicea receives the harshest performance review, as well as the most wonderful promise. The prosperous Laodicean church members are rich and feel secure in their wealth. Their lukewarm comfort nauseates God.
- If the church repents of its complacency, its future will be wonderful—the opportunity to share a throne with Jesus, just as Jesus shares a throne with God!

We Are the Philadelphians, the Laodiceans, All of the Above (p. 20)

- It is possible, though not very comfortable, to see ourselves and our own churches in the letters to the seven churches. The diversity of these ancient churches and the challenges they faced can give insight into the diversity of our churches today.
- We might be so fixed on pure doctrine and theological correctness that we risk losing our “first love.” If so, the challenge is to rekindle our love for one another, for our neighbors, and for God. Perhaps we feel utterly marginalized, poverty-stricken or powerless. If so, Jesus’ promises bring a comforting message and a sense of true hope. Four overly-complacent churches are told to repent, and five churches experience sharp rebuke. These rebukes are wake-up calls. The challenge for us is to look for analogous issues today and ways we risk being dangerously seduced by our culture and its way of life.
- The good news is that Jesus stands at the door and knocks. He wants to erase every trace of lukewarm Christianity and set us on fire as witnesses for the gospel.

Lesson Three

Worshipping God and the Lamb: The Heavenly Journey Begins

Since the earliest times, Christians have sung the songs of *Revelation* in their communion liturgy and in hymns—songs such as “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” and “Worthy Is the Lamb” (*Rev. 5:12*). The singing begins in Chapters 4 and 5, when John journeys up into heaven. As we journey with him, we will see the throne of God and those who worship God (p. 23). The message John wants to convey is that we are to give allegiance to God only, not to any earthly government or power. As we will discover in this lesson, real power comes from a Lamb.

Beam Me Up! (pp. 23–24)

- A visionary journey is a standard feature of ancient apocalypses. Apocalyptic journeys involve both time and space travel. Along the way, one encounters scenes of terrifying and life-changing power. John’s readers knew not to take these visions literally, but to look for the deeper-than-literal message conveyed.
- In a typical apocalypse, the traveler returns home from a visionary journey with an urgent message for readers—usually a call for repentance and faithfulness. Sometimes a political critique is included. *Revelation* is an apocalypse that challenges an unjust empire—the Roman Empire.

In the Heavenly Throne Room—God’s “Oval Office” (p. 24)

- The throne is the symbol of God’s power. This magnificent vision of God’s heavenly throne room may have evoked comparisons with the Roman emperor’s throne room—the seat of the most powerful ruler in the area. In the emperor’s throne room, people threw their crowns before the emperor, a sign of allegiance and worship. But John reminds us that only God is worthy of worship.

Join in the Song of All Creation (pp. 24–25)

- While John is in the throne room, all heaven breaks into praise. Those in heaven teach us to join in praise of the God who created the world and rules the universe.
- The throne room scene points to the central question of *Revelation*: Who is the true God? This book is not about schedules for the end of time; it is about the One who is in charge of the world. Who is the true Lord? Whom do we worship?

Instead of a Lion, a Lamb (p. 25)

- In the midst of worship around the throne of God, a setback threatens to derail everything. God is holding a scroll that must be opened, but no one is worthy to break open the seals. One of the elders tells us “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). Two words—“lion” and “conquer”—lead us to expect a fierce animal.
- *Revelation* delivers an amazing surprise. In place of the lion we expect comes a Lamb. This is a depiction of Jesus in the most vulnerable way possible, as a victim, a lamb, who is slaughtered. He is slain, but standing upright, thus he is shown to be crucified yet risen to life.

Lamb Theology (pp. 26–27)

- The powerful image of Jesus as “the Lamb that was slaughtered” is the central symbol of Christ for all of *Revelation*. This image underscores Jesus’ vulnerability and innocent suffering—experiences many of John’s ancient readers could relate to, given the exclusion that resulted when they rejected Roman culture. The image also links Jesus to the Passover lamb that saved the Israelites in the exodus story—an important connection for our Jewish author and his ancient audience so familiar with the Hebrew scriptures.
- In the face of Rome’s ideology of victory by power and might (*nike*), the Lamb of *Revelation* reveals the power of love. The Lamb becomes the victor not by militaristic power and bloodshed, but through sacrifice—through *being slaughtered*. Evil is defeated not by overwhelming force or violence but by the Lamb’s suffering love on the cross.
- Lamb theology is true victory or true *nike* in the book of *Revelation*. Just like the Lamb, God’s people are called to conquer evil not by fighting, but by remaining faithful, by testifying to God’s victory in self-giving love.

Worthy Is the Lamb Who Was Slain (pp. 27–28)

- Singing breaks out in heaven once again when the Lamb is introduced, with the singing of a “new song,” this time praising Jesus. The emphasis on “new” hints at the way everything will be renewed at the end of *Revelation*, when we journey into the new city to become citizens of God’s New Jerusalem. The new song declares that Jesus’ blood has ransomed us as saints of God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and has made us a multicultural kingdom—a communion of saints.
- *Revelation* is overflowing with songs and heavenly choruses praising God and encouraging us to sing in the midst of all our struggles. Just when the story starts to sound hopeless or despairing, a host of witnesses in heaven break into song. Singing is a profound source of hope in the book of *Revelation*.

Lesson Four

Diagnosing the Crises of Empire

With the opening of the seven seals in *Revelation 6*, we enter into some of the toughest terrain of the entire book—the terrifying middle chapters. This lesson explores how to approach the images created by the opening of the first six seals. In order to reach the hope at the end of the journey we must first experience great conflict and judgment. The visions of the opening of the seals deliver God’s diagnosis of the evils of the Roman Empire. They also give the assurance that the empire’s violent reign soon will come to an end. These visions speak to us today, helping to unveil the toxic aspects of our own culture. The good news is that the witness of God’s people truly makes a difference (p. 31).

Something Is Wrong With the World (pp. 31–32)

Sometimes it takes a shocking experience to get us to see that something is wrong in the world. That kind of jarring experience happens with the opening of the seals in *Revelation 6*. With the opening of each seal, John of Patmos pulls back a curtain to try to wake people up to the urgency of their situation and show them what is so terribly wrong with the world, with the whole Roman Empire system within which they live.

Entering Into the Images (pp. 32–33)

- From very early in the history of the Church, Christians have disagreed about how to interpret the highly symbolic visions in the middle chapters of *Revelation*.
- The theological meaning of the seals is not about predicting, it is about *seeing*.

- It is likely that all three sets of sevens (seals, trumpets, and bowls) show us different pictures of the same reality. Our goal is not to try to puzzle out who or what each of the images represents as if *Revelation* were a secret code. Rather, the goal is to allow John’s message to lay hold of us through its rich imagery.
- Embrace a sense of hope when reading these chapters and don’t be intimidated! God has already told us that those who read and hear these words receive a blessing. **Look for the blessing of hope, not the distraction of fear.**

Opening the Seals (pp. 33–34)

- Picture John of Patmos as a seer, called to help his churches see the urgency of their present situation—an imperial illness grips the earth.
- The first four seals unleash the infamous four horsemen. The urgent message carried by each of these four pictures is of a system of structures and powers gone completely awry, rampaging and tormenting the world.
- John uses the Hebrew scriptures as a tool to look more deeply into his present situation. These references would have reminded his readers of God’s grace, mercy, and love for all the people of God throughout history.

The First Four Seals: The Four Horsemen (pp. 34–35)

- The first horseman reveals the terrifying reality of war.
- The second horse and rider are unnamed, but we might call them “peace-stealer.”
- War brings famine and hunger. The third horsemen represents economic hardship.

- The fourth horseman’s meaning is debated, but he seems to represent what we might call ecological disaster: the power to kill one fourth of the earth itself, with a lethal mix of both natural and human-caused calamities.
- These seals do not “predict” anything in the twenty-first century—yet may learn from important insights found in John's apocalyptic visions of the Roman Empire, as it gallops toward destruction. We can challenge ourselves to see the injustice of global economic inequality today in light of the seven seals of *Revelation*.

The Fifth Seal (pp. 35–36)

- When the fifth seal is opened, John sees an altar, with Rome’s martyrs, alive! Rome’s victims, the people slaughtered by the empire because of their witness, cry out from under the altar, “How long?” This is the cry of all who suffer injustice, across time and space, who long for God to intervene.
- This age-old cry of those who suffer helps explain the urgency of *Revelation*. Oppressive powers that inflict suffering on innocent victims must be stopped! The witness and suffering of those who have been killed must be vindicated by *God’s judgment*. *Revelation* is about justice, and that includes judgment of evil.
- Injustice will last only “a little longer”—a daring answer! Rome’s slogan, “Eternal Rome” (“*Roma Aeterna*”), insisted the Roman Empire would rule forever. But God’s message through John is that it will only last a little longer.

The Sixth Seal (p. 36)

With the opening of the sixth seal, the whole cosmos undergoes cataclysms: an earthquake, the sun darkening, the stars falling to earth. This terrifying vision draws its imagery and symbolism from the Hebrew scriptures' descriptions of "the day of the LORD" and judgment against evil (*Isa. 13:9–10, Joel 2:30–31, Am. 8:9*). It reminds the hearer that no one can hide from the judgment of God. This scene would have been an especially sobering reminder to Christians who might have been tempted to seek security by assimilating into the dominant culture of their day. The imagery of wrath in this chapter is scary. *Revelation* wants us to feel the threat of judgment, and not just jump immediately to hope—although we will get to the hope soon!

Lesson Five

Singing Hymns of Hope: Interludes of Salvation for God's People

Prior to the opening of the seventh seal, *Revelation* delivers a hope-filled surprise—a vision of white-robed martyrs from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” waving palm branches and singing. In a wonderful paradox, the Lamb himself becomes the shepherd. The vision of *Revelation 7* interrupts the opening of the seals, delaying judgment so that God's people can be protected. It also strengthens them, encouraging the power of witness for those who follow the Lamb (p. 39).

Salvation Interludes (pp. 39–40)

“Who is able to stand?” was the question that left us hanging after the opening of the sixth seal. “No one can stand” may be the answer readers would expect. But Chapter 7 teaches us: “*We* can stand.” With God's help, we join the innumerable cloud of witnesses of saints of every time and place, who have been sealed by God, and *we* are able to stand.

Sealing the Saints (pp. 40–41)

- The “sealing” that takes place among God's people marks and claims them. For early Christians the imagery of sealing is probably baptismal imagery. The language of being sealed reminds the early churches they belong to God.
- “Sealing” also would have invoked memories of the Passover story and exodus from Egypt. When God sent the most terrible of the ten plagues, the Israelites “sealed” their doorposts with the blood of the Passover lamb (*Ex. 12*). A similar protective sealing happens in *Revelation*. In this chapter and in many others, John wants readers to connect back to the exodus. Just as Moses led the people of Israel

out of Egypt, now Jesus the Lamb will lead the people on a journey into God's New Jerusalem. The sealing interlude gives us the assurance that God's people are being prepared and protected, even in the midst of judgment.

144,000 Servants of God (pp. 41–42)

- Throughout history, there has been speculation about the identity of those who are sealed. Called “the servants of our God” by an angel bearing the seal of God, this group is described in two visions. The first vision, gives us the number 144,000, made up of 12,000 people from Israel's twelve tribes. The second vision describes a great multitude that no one can count. These probably are two pictures of the same group.
- The number 144,000 is symbolic language for the huge number of people who belong to God, and receive the protective sealing of baptism. Through this huge number, John is able to convey the breadth of God's love. This vision includes *all* the people of God—a multitude so large that “no one could count” (7:9).
- *We* are the saints of God who have been sealed. And *we* are those who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4). This may well be the most important image of God's people in *Revelation*. The picture of ourselves as “followers of the Lamb” is one John wants us to carry with us into our daily lives. Wherever we go, the Lamb, Jesus, is with us, leading us on a journey into a new way of life.

From Every Nation, Tribe, People, and Language (pp. 42–43)

- In the second vision of those who are sealed John “sees” the same people, pictured in terms of a new image—a multicultural multitude “from every nation, all tribes, peoples, languages” (7:9). The churches of *Revelation* were composed of people from various ethnicities and social groups—Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians that included immigrants, slaves, freed slaves, and others—from many parts of the Roman empire.
- This multicultural dimension of *Revelation*, and the way it addresses cultural displacement, can be an important tool to help us address issues of diversity in our churches today. Our churches can model the hospitality of an ethnic roundtable that welcomes all peoples, languages, and cultures.
- We share in a communion of saints that extends through time and place. Our songs are joined with the songs of all Christians who have gone before us—those who have lived and died in Christ. We all are part of the multicultural multitude.

The Shepherding Lamb, God’s Sheltering Presence (p. 43)

The final interlude creates an even more paradoxical image: Christ is both Lamb and shepherd, tending and leading the multitude to springs of living water. God tenderly cares for and shelters the people. God shelters us as well. God dwells *in* and *with* creation.

The Seventh Seal (pp. 43–44)

When the seventh seal is opened, there is silence for half an hour. It is a great stillness, a rest, yet it does not last for long. In the midst of the calm before the storm and the coming of the storm itself, God's people have been sealed and protected. Their identity has been shaped and confirmed as a worshiping, witnessing community of the Lamb that can stand, no matter what befalls it.

Lesson Six

Witness to Hope: The Woman, the Dragon, and Earth's Daring Rescue

At the center of *Revelation* we encounter two dramatic and deeply symbolic stories, representing the life-and-death struggle that is at the heart of the book. These stories are an example of flashback. Even though they come in the middle of the book, they actually are telling the story of Jesus' victory on the cross—a vital message for the isolated and powerless Christian communities of John's day—an event that has already happened, and in which Satan and evil are defeated (p. 47).

Flashback One: Christianizing a Popular Story (pp. 47–48)

- In the first story, a woman gives birth to a son, who is Jesus the Messiah. We then meet a seven-headed red dragon who wants to devour the woman's child, but the baby is snatched up to heaven for safekeeping. When the dragon chases the woman, the woman acquires wings and flies away like a bird. What are we to make of this cosmic story of the woman and her child, and their daring rescue?
- The ancient Romans loved to tell their own history in terms of mythological battle stories, sometimes re-tooling Greek myths to legitimize Rome's claims. In *Revelation 12*, John makes use of a popular story of his day—the birth of the god Apollo—to captivate the imaginations of the Christian community and bring them encouragement and hope. The sun god Apollo was a favorite god of Roman emperors, because they identified themselves with Apollo in order to assert lordship over the empire.

- Seeking to speak to the churches with the words of a story that would be very easy for them to understand, John uses the story to assert the lordship of Jesus rather than of Apollo or the emperor. John's purpose is to help his Christian audience see its own identity in light of God's larger story.

The Woman and the Dragon (pp. 48–49)

The child in this story is depicted not as a Greek god but as the Messiah of *Psalms 2*, who will “rule all nations with a rod of iron” (*Rev. 12:5*). The heavenly woman is a symbolic depiction of Israel, the whole people of God. In this story, Jesus is born of the people of God. The dragon is modeled on the biblical serpent from *Genesis 3*. The woman flees for protection to the wilderness, a familiar biblical place of refuge. It is understood that God sustains and cares for people when they are in the wilderness. The dragon's pursuit of the woman represents the coming persecution of the people of God, as John anticipates it.

Flashback Two: Star Wars in Heaven (pp. 49–50)

- In the second story, Satan gets thrown out of heaven, down to earth, along with his angels. For Christians of John's day, this story would again communicate that Jesus Christ has already won the victory and defeated evil on the cross.
- The cosmic war in heaven, with the defeat of the dragon and his angels by Michael and *his* angels, is meant to depict the heavenly, spiritual dimension of Jesus' victory on the cross. By dying on the cross, Jesus defeated satanic evil. Thanks to Jesus' victory, Satan is no longer the ruler of this world.

- Yet, if the satanic power of evil has been defeated, then why do bad things continue to happen to God’s people on earth? We live in the in-between time, *symbolically* pictured in *Revelation* as the time between Satan’s expulsion from heaven and the time when he will be thrown into the abyss, in Chapter 20. *Revelation 12* uses the symbolic picture of Satan stalking the earth, to warn Christians that things will get worse under Rome’s rule before they get better.

Conquering Satan Through Witness and Testimony (pp. 50–51)

- Even though earth cannot yet rejoice, a voice calls out in heaven, celebrating Satan’s defeat and his expulsion from heaven. We soon learn that the people of God are not just passive spectators in this heavenly drama. The people of God have conquered Satan! *Revelation 12:11* explains, “[T]hey have conquered [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony”
- Just as Jesus the Lamb conquered nonviolently, by giving his life, so we conquer not by attacking anyone or shedding others’ blood. Instead we identify with Jesus’ own blood that was shed when he was crucified by the Romans.
- God’s people conquer Satan by the power of our witness. We conquer by putting the unjust empire on trial and telling the truth about it. John believes that people’s witness—in word and deed—makes a difference.

A Return to Flashback One: Earth Swallows the River of Death (p. 52)

The final character in the dramatic stories of *Revelation 12* is the earth, personified with a mouth, coming to the rescue of the woman being pursued by the dragon. The heroic swallowing of the river on the part of the earth is reminiscent of the Israelites' victory song after the crossing of the Red Sea in the exodus story. This verse is a good reminder of the many positive references to the earth and to the goodness of creation in the book of *Revelation*.

Lesson Seven

Rapture, Violence, and Exodus

This lesson examines two related problems: how to deal with the violent legacy of *Revelation* in public culture today; and how to navigate the violence in the second half of the book. We will learn how to reframe our interpretation of the violent passages in terms of the Bible's story of exodus and liberation, not the violence of cruelty or war (p. 55).

Rapture: The Violent Legacy of *Revelation* in Public Culture (pp. 55–56)

The most serious criticism of *Revelation* is the charge that it promotes violence.

Tragically, this portion of scripture has been used as a drum roll for mayhem and war, for crusades and every kind of attack by Christians against perceived enemies, including people of other faiths. We need to be deliberate about seeking ways to read it that do not encourage violent actions.

Violence: The Two Beasts as the Violence of Empire (pp. 56–57)

To be sure, there *is* violent imagery in this book. But the true violence that *Revelation* depicts is the violence of empire.

- The government of Rome is imaged as a hideous beast from the sea. Local leaders in Asia are imaged as the beast from the land. The beast of Rome intimidates and seduces people, forcing them to worship or give allegiance to the empire.
- The two beasts serve as instruments of the satanic dragon—here identified as “666” (13:18). Many interpreters today claim to have “figured out” the symbolism of “666.” But since seven was considered the number of perfection, it

is likely that “666” simply symbolizes falling short of seven. It is as if John is calling Rome “imperfect, imperfect, imperfect.”

- The “beasts” of the Roman empire are long gone, but today’s “beasts”—violence, economic vulnerability, terrorism, environmental degradation, or other global threats—still stalk our world. We should cling to the ultimate message of *Revelation* to find true hope—beasts and violence do not have the last word.

Understanding *Revelation* in Light of the Exodus Story (pp. 57–58)

Imagine *Revelation* as a re-telling of the exodus plot. God heard the cry of the people suffering as slaves in Egypt. God threatened Egypt with ten plagues designed to show God’s power and persuade Pharaoh to free the people. Similarly, in *Revelation*, God hears the people’s cries and threatens to send new plagues against Rome, the oppressive slaveholder. If *Revelation* is the new exodus, Jesus is the new Moses, leading his followers out of death and into a new land of promise—a land of life and healing. The entire book of *Revelation* is full of exodus imagery. God’s people are not called to take violent action. Rather, as in the exodus, salvation comes only through God’s action and the blood of the Lamb.

Exodus in *Revelation*: The Goal is Repentance—Urgently! (p. 58)

- If *Revelation* is modeled on the exodus story, it also makes important changes. In the exodus story, Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, so Pharaoh was no longer able to repent. But John leaves those references out, suggesting that it is not too late to repent. The focus in *Revelation* is on the urgency of the present moment as a time

for repentance and testimony. Even the most violent visions of *Revelation* serve John's overall goal of conversion and repentance.

- As we ponder the message of *Revelation*, we must remember the overarching promise that God still loves the world. God laments over the world's pain. We hear this in *Revelation 8:13* and *12:12*. It is as if God is crying on behalf of the suffering world. In the slain Lamb Jesus, God shares our cries and comes to deliver us. God does not curse the world. God loves the world enough to weep and lament for it, and even to come to dwell in it. God will never leave the world behind!

Armageddon, and the Word as Weapon (pp. 58–60)

- The word *Armageddon* is perhaps the most famous word from *Revelation* used in popular culture today. *Armageddon* appears only once in the entire book of *Revelation (16:16)*, yet it has fueled an industry of end-times books and movies fixated on war and destruction as God's message. But notice that no battle is described in *Revelation 16:16*. It is delayed to allow time for repentance. The armies amass, but instead of a battle, the scene shifts to the judgment of Babylon.
- One scene [in *Revelation 19*] is important in our final observation about violence. Jesus returns as a warrior on a white horse, clad in a robe dipped in blood—most likely Jesus' *own* blood that was shed on the cross—not the blood of his enemies. For *Revelation*, the crucifixion is the key battle, not some future battle of “Armageddon.” Moreover, there is no reason for thinking that any Christians take part in the war in *Revelation 19*. The army is clearly identified as a heavenly army—and amazingly, no actual attack or war is ever pictured. The war is over as soon as it begins. This is because the victory has already been won by Jesus on

the cross—and is not to be fought in a final cataclysmic war. The power we find in Jesus' blood is "Lamb Power": the power of God's vulnerable, nonviolent love to change the world.

Lesson Eight

The Empire Has Fallen! Evacuate Now!

Our journey through *Revelation* culminates in a tale of two cities [Babylon and New Jerusalem], with a call to make a choice between them. First, we view the judgment of the evil city, Babylon (*Rev. 17–18*), representing the Roman Empire and all unjust empires. John wants us to see with our own eyes the pathology of the drunken empire that has intoxicated the world. He wants us to be repulsed by its seductively violent ways, to be shocked at the collapse of its fabulous wealth and power. Even though Rome is still in power when John writes *Revelation*, he seeks to convince readers that Rome is doomed. His urgent message is that we must “come out” of the imperial system of Babylon before it is too late, so that we can participate as citizens in God’s New Jerusalem, the city of blessing and promise [which we will look at in Lesson Nine] (p.63).

The Choice Between Two Cities, Personified as Women (pp. 63–65)

- Babylon is the nickname John gives to the hated Roman Empire throughout *Revelation*. Just as the ancient Babylonian empire destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC, Rome violently destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD, within the lifetime of John’s readers. The core message of *Revelation 17–18* is that empires will be judged.
- The image of Rome as the garish “whore of Babylon,” wearing gold jewelry and a scarlet dress, and seducing nations with her cup of fornication is one of the most unforgettable images of *Revelation*. If we were to read this image literally, it could fuel the worst kind of evil action against women. We should not read the

image of the whore of Babylon literally, just as we do not read the image of Jesus as a Lamb literally. Rome was an empire, not a woman.

- While the vision of Babylon has been used to vilify women, its primary emphasis is economic and political, and has nothing to do with gender. We can [actually] read this scene in a liberating way, highlighting the economic and political critique of Rome, and using it to examine ourselves and our role in political and economic injustice.

It's About the Economy (pp. 65–66)

In addition to the imagery of the whore, John describes Rome in terms of drunkenness and fornication. This charge of “fornication” is an economic charge. Rome lives by its predatory trade, trafficking in resources from the farthest points of the Roman Empire, exploiting people and creation both near and far in the process. [The image of the whore] symbolizes Rome’s wealth and power that have become irresistibly seductive and enthralling. An extreme version of “keeping up with the Joneses” has captivated the entire world, as far as John is concerned. [But] Rome’s seductions of wealth and power must be resisted. Just as Babylon claimed omnipotence but eventually was destroyed, so, too, Rome and all unjust empires ultimately will fall.

All the King's Horses, All the King's Men (pp. 66–67)

- John portrays the fall of [Babylon/Rome] through the laments of three groups who profited from Babylon’s wealth: kings, merchants, and seafarers. One by one these three elite groups cry out, “Alas! Alas!” lamenting the loss of shipments of cargo they can no longer buy and sell.

- The cargo list of *Revelation 18:12–13* encompasses the span of Rome’s extractions from the land and sea: gold, precious stones, pearls, exotic hardwoods and wooden products, ivory, metals, marble, luxury spices, food, armaments and war horses, and even “slaves—and human lives” (*18:13*). These final two items in the cargo list of *Revelation 18* furnish the most explicit critique of slavery and slave trade in the New Testament.
- Rome’s devastation of conquered lands extended from crimes against humanity even into crimes against creation, causing environmental problems. With the cargo list presented in *Revelation 18:12–13*, John connects the over-consumption of the empire with the ecological devastation of lands and peoples. He proclaims that the empire’s unsustainable way of life must come to an end.

Putting the Empire on Trial (pp. 67–68)

- In *Revelation 18* the final defeat of Rome/Babylon happens not on a battlefield but in a legal court scene. *Revelation* overturns war discourse with a divine class-action lawsuit. It is as if a war-crimes tribunal has put the entire empire—not just its leaders—on trial. The plaintiffs are the saints, representing all of Rome’s victims who have been killed on earth. The defendant is Babylon/Rome and all other oppressive regimes throughout history. The charge is murder. The judge is God, who sentences Rome to receive a like measure of its own unjust medicine at the hands of its victims.
- The message of the trial scene in the divine courtroom is that God desires justice. Those who oppress the world with unjust trade and violence will be sentenced and punished. Their empires will come to an end. In Jesus, the slain Lamb, the new

reign of God has already begun to dawn. *Revelation* calls on its readers to engage in the struggle for God's new world of salvation with justice. With powerful exodus language, God's people are called to "come out" of empire and into God's new reign. Revelation shows us the way—*God's people* become a sign of prophetic judgment against the exploitative empire by living differently.

Lesson Nine

Journey Into the New Jerusalem

Our journey through *Revelation* comes to completion in the vision-tour of the second city, the city of blessing, God's New Jerusalem. This vision is the very opposite of Armageddon. The New Jerusalem is an earth-centered image of beauty and healing. This vision fulfills the people's longings for safety and peace with God. It invites us to see ourselves as citizens already of this city, and to live our lives in terms of this vision of hope. This is a vision that transforms the way we live our lives each day. As our journey comes to an end, we come to see our own cities in light of God's vision of healing (p. 71).

Here Comes the Bride (p. 72)

[In *Revelation 21–22*, we see a vision of] the bride, the wife of the Lamb, as a wondrous, radiant city, a place of welcome and renewal for the whole world.

Everything Is “New” (p. 72)

Newness is an image of resurrection and renewal. The Greek word for the “new” earth in *Revelation 21* can mean either “renewed” or “new,” but it does not mean a completely different earth. The earth becomes “new” just as our bodies will be resurrected, though they still are our bodies.

Rapture in Reverse: God Dwells With Us on Earth (pp. 72–73)

- [U]nique to *Revelation* is that the heavenly city does not stay up in heaven. It comes down out of heaven to earth, offering a place of welcome and home to all of God's people. A fundamental example of apocalyptic hope is this message we find at the end of *Revelation*: God is coming to make a home among us. As we come out of empire, God comes to us.
- This vision fulfills the people's deep longings for a dwelling with God; the promise of God's dwelling among us recalls God's "tabernacling" with Israel in the wilderness, following the exodus. There will be no temple in God's new city, for the presence of God and the Lamb will be the temple or tabernacle.
- It is to the earth that God makes a commitment in *Revelation*. Earth is the location of salvation.

The Contrast to Rome (pp. 73–74)

- The declarations of "no more" in *Revelation 21:1* and *4* show the ways this mystical city of beauty and love is the opposite of the toxic political economy and ecology of Rome/Babylon that was destroyed in Chapters 17–18. Rome brought famine and violence. New Jerusalem's tree of life bears fruit each month for people who are hungry.
- Even in the midst of hopeful scenes, the warnings and threats continue. The goal of [such] threats is not to predict who will be saved and who will not. *Revelation* does not predestine anyone for damnation. The goal, rather, is to persuade. John wants to wake us up to be faithful to the vision of God and the Lamb.

Touring the City—The Tree of Life and the River of Life (pp. 74–75)

- New Jerusalem is a welcoming place; foreigners are invited to enter into the radiant city whose lamp is the Lamb, Jesus.
- The throne of God, which was in heaven in *Revelation 4*, is now located on earth, at the center of the beloved city. The river flows out from the throne of God. The vision of verdant green space and God’s river of life draws on the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of a wondrous, tree-lined river flowing out from the temple (*Ezek. 47:1–12*). Everyone is free to drink from the river. Water flows “as a gift”—that is, without payment or price, even for those who have no money.
- On either side of the river grows the tree of life. This is imagery from the Garden of Eden, now recreated in the center of a thriving urban landscape. The leaves of the tree are medicine. The leaves of the tree bring the healing of the nations.

The New Jerusalem Vision and the Healing of Our World (p. 75)

While New Jerusalem is a vision of our life with God after death, it also holds promise and hope for *this* world, for Jerusalem and other war-torn cities. The heart of the message of *Revelation* is not that God plans to destroy our world, but that God’s desire is to heal. *Revelation* calls upon people to live as citizens of God’s New Jerusalem even now, right in the heart of empire. These glimpses of a renewed earth can inspire and motivate us to undertake the exodus journey out of the unsustainable ways of empire, to live as citizens of God’s renewed world.

Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End (pp. 75–76)

- Listening to *Revelation* being read aloud in the worship service, early Christians traveled with John on a life-changing apocalyptic journey. They traveled up to heaven, to see the throne of God and the Lamb. They witnessed conflict and victory, and they endured. Their journey of worship now comes to a close. As they come back from behind the apocalyptic veil, as they gather around the Eucharistic table, worshipers now see their own cities in a new and deeper way.
- Throughout its twenty-two chapters, *Revelation* invites us to drink deeply from its metaphors of promise and warning, vision and blessing. It is a book not of judgment but of justice, of radical hope for the world's future. God is with us through every beginning and every ending, our Alpha and Omega. That is the promise of *Revelation*. God's people gather around the throne of the Lamb, along the river, beneath the healing tree of life, singing "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"