



The book of Revelation

Study notes
for life groups



The book of Revelation

Notes for life group leaders.

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Life group leaders will know how best to use these notes for their group. Some groups will want to work through all the questions and even take on homework, others will work better at a more meditative pace, attempting a couple of questions at each meeting and discussing how to apply the lessons learnt to their own lives. Some groups will be keen to explore the *asides* material below and others less so.

A useful approach is:

1. Summarise the themes/images/arguments/drama of a passage. Use pictures or craft play if you have those skills. The overview will keep small groups from getting lost in the details.
2. Often ask why a passage was written and how does the author achieve his purpose. For example: Why do we have chapter 6? Because it explains the context of gospel ministry and God's relationship to the history of our tragic world. The encouragement of that chapter is, despite the chaos of history caused by God's enemies, Christ is ultimately in command.
3. When you get to the details of a passage some useful questions to help clarify the meaning of words or verses are: Who? What? Why? When? Where?
4. The context of each passage and word will frequently give you the meaning. For example – the 144,000 saints in chapter 7 is explained by the innumerable multitude in the second part of the chapter.
5. History has shown us it is easy to get lost in subjective interpretations of the book of Revelation. If that happens with your group take note of the difficult passages and return to the group with options for understanding it more clearly at a later time.
6. Application of this book has a colourful history. One mistake has been to assume it was written only for us and our times. However, Jesus is clear that it was for the churches in the first century AD and then, through them, for the churches of all times and places, including us (Chapters 2 & 3).

To apply this book to our lives we work down into the theology or themes using questions like:

- What does this teach us about God or human beings or human societies? Lessons here cross cultures and times.
- Where else in the Bible have we seen this theme or image and how does that cross reference or allusion to the Old Testament help us understand this passage? This is the Bible interpreting the Bible across cultures and times.
- How does this theme contrast with what we do or believe today? Or, to put that question another way, what would change in our lives if we lived out this teaching/theme?

How to understand the book of Revelation

1. It is a book about Jesus Christ (the hero of the story) and a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1) to his churches (Chapters 2 & 3)
2. It is from God, through Christ, to the churches to be read, heard and kept and it is intended to bless those who read or hear it read (Chapter 1). That is, despite the warnings and images, the message of this book is a positive one.
3. It comes in the form of:
 - a. A revelation; apo-calupsis – a type of writing designed to reveal the realities controlling current and future events.
 - b. A prophecy; forth-telling (reminding of God's words in the past), foretelling (predicting) and fulfilment.
 - c. A letter; to the seven churches (1:4, 22:16).
4. It is a message for the first century church (22:10) a message to the church throughout history as well as a message for us. The main interpretations of the book are:
 - a. Past – relevant to the 1st Century only
 - b. Historical – an outline of church history. A continuous story of the different stages of world history.
 - c. Futurist – a prophecy for times that are still to come. Emphasis on Armageddon and the Millennium.
 - d. Last days – a description of life in the last days from the ascension of Christ until his return. Therefore, relevant to every century.
 - e. Allegory – a non-historical depiction of spiritual truths.
 - f. Post-modern – a random tapestry of images with no discernible structure that can be used as a tool to realise our own spiritual journey.

These notes support option d.

5. It develops and fulfils Old Testament (OT) themes, language and images. This is important as poor interpretations arise when we interpret Revelation's imagery using symbols from our world or experience rather than from the OT. Revelation is the Bible interpreting the Bible through previously established themes such as: Creation, Exodus, Tabernacle, Temple, Prophecy.
 - a. There are 404 verses in the book, 278 of which use the OT
 - b. It uses symbolic language drawn from the OT for example:
 - i. Numbers: 1 = excellence, 7 = fulfilment or completion, 6 = imperfection, 12 = people of God, 1000 = large number/uncountable.
 - ii. Colours: White – divine presence, victory, dignity; Black – disaster, distress; Red – blood & violence; Green – death; Purple/Scarlet – immorality
 - iii. Symbolic language: 1:12-16 – word as a sword. 1:20 – 7 stars are angels. 5:5,6 – Lion of Judah who is the slain lamb of God, the man Jesus Christ. 11:8 - allegory. 13:18 – need for wisdom to understand. 17:5 – this woman is the mystery, Babylon the Great.
6. The millennium is the 1000-year period mentioned in 20:1-7 and it is not found elsewhere in the Bible. In the modern church we need to work out what this passage means as it will determine our understanding of the rest of the book. There are three main views:
 - a. Postmillennial – The world improves as the Saints gain power over the world and then Christ returns. Unfortunately, we don't see this happening and it encourages the idea that the work of the church ultimately saves the world. Self-salvation is not born out by a careful reading of the rest of Revelation.
 - b. Premillennial – Christ's return is followed by a 1000-year reign on earth, then rebellion and then the final judgement. This doesn't stand up to a careful reading of chapters 19 and 20.
 - c. Amillennial – the book of Revelation does not recount consecutive events but parallel events. The same period of the last days described in various ways until the final judgement in 20:11-15. The

millennium is then another way of describing the time of the church in these last days. That it is described as the rule of the saints, a golden period but also reminds us of Charles' Dicken's description of the French Revolution as the worst of times and the best of times in *A tale of two cities*. There is good going on within the chaos of world history described elsewhere in the book. This is the interpretation I will be following in our notes below.

7. Revelation expands on Jesus' warnings about the last days regarding deceivers and false Christs (2,3,13); wars, earthquakes and famines (6,8,9,12); witness during suffering (11); abomination of desolation (13,17); changes to the Sun, Moon and Stars (12); the coming of the Son of Man (1,19,22). (See Mark 13 and Matthew 24).

Early church interpreters through to Augustine of Hippo through to modern commentators like Graham Goldsworthy, Paul Barnett, Leon Morris and Richard Baukham observe that the book of Revelation gives us *parallel* or *concurrent* descriptions of history between the resurrection and second coming of Christ. To put that another way, the dramatic stories in Revelation cover the same time period but from different perspectives. The trumpets don't chronologically follow the seals followed by the signs, followed by the plagues (even though the visions follow each other chronologically, for example: 7:1, 10:1, 13:11, 14:1); rather these are separate views of what it is like to live in the last days which is also the days of the church, the days of the rule of the saints (Chapter 20). These parallel views of human history are interrupted throughout the book by interpretations of world events seen from heaven.

The table below summarises the parallel images of the book of Revelation. If you allow for the prologue and letters at the start of the book as an introduction and application of the book's teaching; then the visions of seals, trumpets, beasts, plagues, Babylon and the Bride and the final Sabbath consummation makes seven sections to the book. It is a complete account; neither to be added to or taken from (22:18,19).

Seven seals (6-7) Persecution	Seven trumpets (8-11) repentance	Seven beasts/signs (12-14) Persecution	Seven plagues (15-16) repentance
1. White horse of conquest	1. Hail, fire and blood. A third of vegetation burnt up.	1. The pregnant woman.	1. onto land. Boils and sores for those who worship the beast.
2. Fiery red horse of war and destruction.	2. A mountain thrown into the sea. A third of sea creatures die.	2. The seven headed dragon (the enemy and destroyer)	2. onto sea. All the sea turned to blood.
3. Black horse of famine/ want	3. A Star falls from the sky. A third of fresh water turns bitter.	3. The male child is snatched up to God.	3. onto fresh water. All turned to blood.
4. Pale horse of death and Hades.	4. A third of the light of the Sun, Moon and Stars fails.	4. Beast of the sea who causes people to worship the dragon.	4. onto Sun. Burns people who remain unrepentant.
5. Souls of the martyrs. "How long, Sovereign Lord, Holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"	5. The king of the Abyss (Satan) releases the torture of the locust/scorpions upon all who don't have the seal of God. (illness)	5. Beast of the earth does signs to glorify the dragon.	5. onto the throne of the beast and his kingdom becomes darkness. People remain unrepentant.
6. Uncreation. "The day of the wrath of the lamb."	6. Angels released to kill a third of humankind.	6. Image of the beast set up. The killing of those who refuse to worship, along with economic persecution. Name and mark of the beast.	6. onto Euphrates river, to prepare way for Kings of the east.
Heaven's view: "A great multitude that no one could count....'who are these?' ... these are they who have come out of the great tribulation, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb." Silence in heaven	Heaven's view: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (11:15). Humankind still unrepentant and idolatrous. John (and the faithful with him) must nevertheless go on prophesying. God's witnesses only ever appear to be defeated - God will see them triumph.	Heaven's view: The saved and marked are kept in heaven now. The eternal gospel has defeated great Babylon. The ultimate torment and destruction of those who worship the beast is promised.	Heaven's view: The dragon fights back with evil spirits who gather the world's armies for a final conflict, but no conflict arrives.
7. Silence in heaven	7. "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ."	7. The Son of Man reaps in harvest and judgement.	7. onto the air. "It is done" The nations judged and destroyed - divided.

Chapter 1

- Read the book to answer: "Why was the book of Revelation written?"
- What difference does it make to the reader to learn that the ultimate victory has already occurred and is not a future event? (1:18)
- How is the doctrine of the Trinity supported by Revelation 1? (see also 22:13)
- Here are references to the Old Testament allusions in chapter 1.
 - White hair and robe & son of man: See Daniel 7:9-14
 - Golden sash: see Exodus 39:8-21
 - Feet of fired bronze: see Daniel 2:27-47
- Do these images make sense?
- How could this vision effect you own life with God?

Prophecy for us - Revelation 1

A revelation of Jesus Christ (1-3)

A prophecy for us

A letter to us

One like a Son of Man

Write what you see, what is & what will take place (19)

Prophecy now

Chapters 2 & 3

Read the passage. These churches were located in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in what were major cities of the day (many of which continued to exist into modern times). In a book of symbols, the number 7 represents completion or fullness (you can see this use of numbers in Matthew 18:22 where Jesus requires his disciples forgive the brother who repents seven times seventy or, in some translations, seventy times seven – in other words, completely forgive, fullness of forgiveness, a totally restored relationship). The seven churches are historical churches but they are also types of churches – they are what churches at all times and places can tend to be. That is why these letters are for us.

- Why is it that the strengths of a church do not atone for its weaknesses in God's eyes?
- Why is Jesus biased towards those churches which are persecuted, have few resources and are frail?
- How do the judgments meet the wrong in each church (2:2; 2:16; 2:21,23; 3:3; 3:16,19)?
- Using a study Bible, remind yourself of the Old Testament stories Jesus refers to: why does Jesus interpret and apply these stories as lessons for the church? What should be our attitude towards the Old Testament?
- What sort of church is our church? You may like to begin by listing our strengths, then our weaknesses, then consider how judgement and grace would be applied by Jesus in our case.

Christ speaks to us - Revelation 2 & 3

Ephesus (love)

Smyrna (suffering)

Pergamum (truth)

Thyatira (immorality)

Sardis (hypocrisy)

Philadelphia (frailty)

Laodicea (apathy)

Chapters 4 & 5

If possible, have two people read the passage out loud while others listen with their eyes closed. The imagery contains deliberate contradictions, simile and metaphor that are clues to its interpretation. If it is wrong to interpret these visions in a wooden and literal manner what is John trying to convey to us by using these descriptions and writing techniques?

There is Old Testament background to the imagery in these two chapters, this background provides us with the interpretation.

- a) 4:3 God is described as Light (Genesis 1:3 – see how John interprets this verse in John 1)
 - b) 4:4 The elders and council of God (see Isaiah 24:23, I Kings 22:19 and Job 1 for example)
 - c) 4:5 The lightning, thunder and voices from the throne (see Exodus 19 and the New Testament comment on this event in Hebrews 12:18-29)
 - d) 4:6 Visions or descriptions of God in the Old Covenant (Exodus 24:10 – Israel's elders, Ezekiel 1:22 - 26, I Kings 7:23 the sea of Solomon's temple, compare Revelation 21:1)
 - e) 4:6 The Cherubim that are linked to all life (Genesis 3:22-24, Isaiah 6:1-3, Ezekiel 10:14)
 - f) 5:1 The scroll of God's words and purposes (Ezekiel 2:10, Jeremiah 36)
 - g) 5:10 The hosts of heaven (Daniel 7:10)
- What do the images of Chapter 4 teach us about God and our access to him?
 - Why does John weep (5:4) that no one in heaven (angelic), on the earth (the living), or under the earth (the dead and demonic) was found worthy to open the scroll?
 - The Elder, in 5:5, combines two prophecies to describe Jesus: Genesis 49:9-10 and Isaiah 11:1-9. What do they teach us about Jesus?
 - In 5:6 the slain lamb is the ancient symbol of sacrifice (for example: Exodus 12 – the Passover, compare Revelation 1:18.) Why does Jesus' death make him worthy to open the scroll of God's purposes for history? What does his death achieve and why is that worthy of the unrestrained praise of heaven and all creation?
 - Describe how the praise of heaven changes over chapters 4 & 5.
 - Why is it important that we know the character and qualities of the one who holds the scroll?
 - What difference does this make to how we interpret natural disasters, wars, famines, plagues and diseases which this prophecy goes onto describe and which we experience as a daily reality?
 - Would these chapters help you to counsel someone who was suffering?

Two asides: Science and History.

1. If the voice of creation praises God what does this teach us about a Christian approach to natural sciences?
2. If Jesus holds the interpretive keys to history (the scroll of God's word), how does this help us to critique modern attempts to interpret history through say: Evolutionary theory? The rise of the working classes? The inevitability of democracy and capitalism? The rise of a master race in Europe or Asia? The importance of economics?

Revelation 4 & 5 - Who is worthy?

Things we do not know

The throne in heaven (Chapter 4)

- light
- 24 elders
- 7 spirits
- sea, thunder & lightning
- 4 living creatures
- Praise to the eternal God for:
 - his being
 - his creation

The scroll & the lamb (Chapter 5)

- the sealed scroll
- who is worthy?
- I wept & wept
- The lion of Judah, the slain lamb
- Praise to the lamb
 - he purchased human beings for God
 - worthy is the lamb to open the scroll
- Praise to the eternal God and to the Lamb.

Chapters 6 & 7

In a group, take turns reading out loud a few verses until you have heard all of these two chapters. Do the same thing with Mark 13.

- How would you summarise the message and application of Mark 13?
- How would you summarise the message of Revelation 6 & 7?
- Who is able to stand before God at the end? (Rev 6:17 & 7:9)
- What difference does it make to us now to know who will stand and who will cower?

As Jesus, the lamb, opens the seals, we are given the first of four descriptions of the last days, the times between Jesus rising to rule and his coming again to fulfil his kingdom.

Seal 1 – The white rider. White is God's colour in this book (1:14) and the only thing said to conquer in Revelation is the gospel, the news of what God has achieved for us in Christ's life, death and resurrection (1:18, 2:11 etc, 19:11-16). The rider then is Christ who goes forth with his word to conquer. This is the time of the mission of the church where people are called from every nation to be a kingdom of priests to God (5:9,10)

Seals 2 to 4 - The context of the conquest of Christ (him winning people to his kingdom) is famine, want, death and fear of hades. In other words, the earthly context for the mission of the church is a world marred by sin and disaster.

- How does this prophecy challenge more romantic ideas of Christian mission?
- Christ is active as the white rider (Seal 1) but only opens the rest of the seals. Describe God's influence over the tragedies of history revealed here.
- How would this understanding of God and his authority over world events help a persecuted and small church in the first century?

Seal 5 - The heavenly context of the mission of the church is the martyrs, kept safe under the altar of God's presence (a sacrifice of thanksgiving?) from where they are calling for justice and an end to the troubles unleashed in Seals 2-4. Their prayers are powerful (8:2-5).

- What does this teach us about prayer and about God's care of those who have died in Christ?

Seal 6. There are two types of people in this book. Those who receive the conquering gospel and those who reject it.

- What does this passage teach us about those who claim they would believe if they could see God?
- Why do people want to be crushed to death rather than face God the Father and Son?
- How do people avoid God in your experience?

In Chapter 7 the same group of people is described from two different perspectives.

12X12X1000 = 144,000 is symbolic for the full number of God's people (12 tribes, 1000 for an uncountable number). The symbolism is emphasised by the oddities in the list of tribes. Judah (the Messiah's tribe but not the tribe of the first born, Reuben) heads the list. Dan and Ephraim are missing. Also, at the time of writing, the 10 Northern tribes did not exist anymore and the temple and the tribe of Judah were ruined. This is a vision of the Old Testament prophecies where even the gentiles will be added to Israel (God's people – see Paul in Romans 9-11).

The second description of the same group cannot be numbered (7:9 onwards).

- What does comparing 7:10 and 7:17 teach us about our God and our Salvation?
- Why has Jesus given the church this prophecy about the end of time (7:14)?

Chapter 12

Chapters 8 and 9 repeat, with different images and emphases, the themes of chapters 6 and 7. Likewise, chapter 11, with the story of the two witnesses, is recapitulated in chapter 12 with the story of the woman, the dragon and the male child.

In the law of the old covenant a legal charge or legal transaction needed to be validated by at least two witnesses (for example: Deuteronomy 17:5-7; 19:15). In chapter 11 it is likely that the combined imagery of Temple, Witnesses and the Ark of the Covenant point to one aspect of the life of the church represented by the witnesses, namely, to prophecy against the wickedness of a world that disowns God's ways. The world hates this witness and would kill the church (John 15:18) yet mysteriously the church persists and lives again even where it once seemed to be dead.

Chapter 12 revisits the story of the church from another direction, rather than picking up references to law and temple, the vision takes as further back to creation with allusions to the first mother – Eve (her name means: *Mother of the Living*, the woman, in Revelation 12:17, is also a mother to more than the messiah)

- Read Genesis 2 & 3 and make note of the allusions used in Revelation 12 – some people identify the woman in this passage with Mary, the mother of Jesus; does that interpretation work well or not?
- What does the imagery of a royal woman clothed with universal significance and dignity, whom nature serves and glorifies, and yet, is frail, humiliated, in pain, homeless and on the run from her enemies, teach us about the church?
- In the Genesis creation story, we're told that the irony behind the woman's pain in child birth (bringing new life into the world) is that one day it will produce a child who will crush the serpent's head; that is, destroy the liar and the effect of his lies, namely our death. How did Jesus crush the serpent's head? (see 5:9f)
- Verse 5 is an odd summary of Jesus' earthly life. Why does this verse cite Psalm 2?
- How is the current state of the church described in this chapter? What are we to do in this state? (Elsewhere in the New Testament the church is described as being: 'strangers in the world' (i.e. homeless, see 1 Peter 1:1); in exile – dispersed amongst the nations (see James 1:1); as a woman (see 2 John 1, Ephesians 5:21-33); and on the verge of the promised land in the wilderness (see Hebrews 3:7-19).
- Who is the dragon and what does he do?
- Why are the images surrounding the dragon repulsive?
- The effect of Christ's death was to force Satan from the heavenly court of God. He has no influence there now. What was the basis of his influence and why was he tolerated in the court?
- What difference did Christ's atonement make to Satan's status and influence with God?
- Read Romans 3:21-26. What did the cross of Christ mean to God?
- How do we conquer Satan, our great enemy?

The woman and the dragon - Revelation 12

The woman

The dragon

The male child

Defeating Satan

Chapter 13

The Dragon does not give up making war on the woman's offspring (chapter 12) but calls out of the sea or abyss (Uncreation – see Genesis 1:1 or the story of Noah in Genesis 7 to 9) a monster in his own image.

Read Daniel 7. How do the beasts in Daniel 7 help us to interpret the Beast of the Sea in Revelation 13? It is helpful to compare this amalgam of beasts with Revelation 11:8 for a clue as to how this book interweaves historical empires to expose their theological likeness.

- What does the beast of the sea represent in our world? Is it one empire or the potential evil in any human government?
- The beast has many heads and the beast is mortally wounded and yet returns to life. How does political and military evil die and revive in our world?
- Jesus said that we should render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's (Matthew 22:15-22). What are legitimately the things of Caesar and the things of God?
- Give examples of when the State claims the prerogatives of God.
- The beast of the earth is later called the false prophet – he is the spin doctor of evil who justifies the force of the beast of the sea and the economic exploitation that comes from the misuse of power. What ideas have been used to justify the use of force, economic exploitation and slavery in the last few hundred years?
- The beast marks people. Products and cattle are marked; slaves and prisoners of war are marked; political dissidents and those destined to be killed are marked but people are named (e.g. Revelation 3:12, 13:8, 14:1). How do we make people into commodities today? Where has it been difficult for Christians to earn a living or receive an education or even be allowed to live?
- The name of the beast is likely to be a Gematria – where a numerical value is assigned to each letter. For some ancient Christians, the numbers represented Caesar Nero (in Hebrew with some fudging on the spelling) but, in this book of symbols, the number 6 implies incompleteness, where 7 is the symbol of completion. And we have just learnt of the Dragon, the Beast of the Sea and the Beast of the Earth who are, together, a parody of the Trinity of God who has featured from the first chapter. God gives life and the Dragon takes it; Christ brings sacrifice, reconciliation, peace and personhood; the Beast of the Sea brings violence, economic and physical oppression, exploitation and injustice – it turns human beings into commodities; the Spirit of God brings truth, the false prophet brings the ideology of lies to persuade us to worship the creature rather than the creator.
- Make a list of situations in our world that belong to the beasts and situations that belong to the Trinity.
- Some take these, and other passages in the New Testament to mean that Christians should not be involved in politics, the military or economic trade. Is that a true application of this chapter? Can you think of better approaches for politicians, soldiers and traders who are Christians?

Aside: Time, Times and Half a Time.

There is one period of time which is marked in three ways in Revelation. 42 months (12:16, 13:5) = 1260 days (11:2,3. With 30-day months) = time (1 year), times (2 years) and half a time (6 months – see 12:14).

This is a reference to the prophecy in Daniel (Dan 7:25; 12:7) which prefigured the rise of the Syrian tyrant, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who, for three years plus (168-165 BC) stopped sacrifices in the temple, burnt copies of the law, murdered Jewish priests and anyone who kept the Sabbath or circumcised their children. He made Jewish practice illegal and insisted that God's people adopt Hellenic practice and philosophy. He set up 'the abomination that desolates' – a statue of Zeus - in the holy place of the temple after sacrificing pigs there.

The battle against him (the first recorded instance of guerrilla warfare in human history) is found in 2 Maccabees (from the Biblical Apocrypha). His defeat and eventual death are still celebrated today in the Jewish feast of Hanukah (which takes place around our Christmas time).

This desolation of God's people became a symbol of unrestrained evil and opposition that was frequently referred to in the first century (Matthew 24:15-26, Mark 13:14, Luke 21:20-21). The mention of the times indicates that the triumph of evil over God's people is only ever temporary (Revelation 11:7-12), the mention of the times in three different ways indicates that the limit on the triumph of evil is certain – which is still good news for the majority of Christ's church today.

The dragon and the beasts

The enemy's strategy

The beast of the sea

The beast of the earth

The mark of the beast

The name of the beast

Chapters 17 & 18

According to the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John, there are three systems in our world that are influenced by the Dragon/The Devil/The Satan/That Ancient Serpent (Chapter 12). They are:

1. The beast of the sea (Chapters 13 & 17) which represents the tendency of governments to worship and service the political/military system instead of serving the creator's values.
2. The beast of the land, also known as the false prophet (Chapters 13 & 16) which represents false religion, false ideology and philosophy or propaganda that is used to justify the political/military system and keep the peoples under control.
3. The harlot Babylon which represents the tendency of the economic systems of our world to become self-serving, to support an indulgent and godless culture which is, in turn, supported by the political/military system and the ideals that justify it. Babylon not only rides on the back of military violence (17:7) but rides on nations and multitudes (17:15) to gain and justify her greed. Babylon's role is to seduce the leaders of nations, through the pursuit of wealth, into giving up on whatever knowledge of God and his justice they may have (17:18). Babylon's ambition for us is to worship the creature rather than the creator.

The background of Babylon takes us all the way back to Genesis 4 where the murderer, Cain, builds the first city (in defiance of the curse God laid upon him). In Cain's line, technology and culture grows with depravity. After the flood that uncreates the world we find in Genesis 11 yet another city, utilising the latest technology, is being built to challenge God, to establish a humanist society, to build God out of his world. A tower is under construction on the plains of Shinar in Babel, the area where the Babylonian empire would one day arise. Though there is humour, or rather, sarcasm in Genesis 11 (God has to 'come down' to see the tower that reaches into his heavens) nevertheless, the tower of Babel becomes a symbol of organised godlessness which God himself limits. Babylon, in the 7th and 6th centuries BC, is the conqueror of Jerusalem, the empire that stops the worship of the true God (they destroyed the temple in 587/6 BC) and the one who scatters God's people into exile. Babylon is the place of exile in all the major prophets. In the New Testament the people of God are still said to be in exile. We still live in Babylon (e.g. James 1:1)

In chapters 17 & 18 of Revelation there are allusions to many empires: Rome, Persia, Babylon, Greece and perhaps more. As we have seen before (e.g. 11:8), this is how this genre of visionary writing expresses general truths that are pertinent to all times and places.

- Thinking of more recent political history, in what way are the tyrannies and indulgences of the last two centuries described in these chapters?
- There is an uneasy relationship between the beast of the sea and Babylon and a love-hate relationship between the seduced Kings and the Whore. When do we see the economic system and political/military systems at odds with each other?
- In the light of these chapters, what would you say to those who think Christianity is only a resource for our private lives and has nothing to say about national priorities, military policy or social issues?
- Why is Babylon called a prostitute?
- Do we do economics for economics sake? Is the economy (our ability to buy and sell) the chief political concern of Australian politics? What is useful and what is damaging about our preoccupation?
- Why does heaven rejoice at the fall of Babylon?
- Given this chapter, what would you say to people who argue that because it would be unbearable for the saved to see people in hell – therefore hell does not exist?

The fall of Babylon - Revelation 17 & 18

The prostitute Babylon

Babel – building God out of his world (Genesis 11)

Babylon – the destroyer of God's people

Babylon – the destroyer of the worship of God

Babylon – the place of exile of God's people

Babylon – will fall...the end of temptation

The economic system and the military/political system

The love/hate relationship between power and wealth

The final global financial crisis

Don't be seduced...'Come out of her my people'

Chapters 19 & 20

The book of Revelation teaches that either Christ bears our penalty or we do. Our natural state is a state of condemnation but that is a state we can, by various means, desire as preferable to a life in God.

Read chapter 19 out loud in your group.

- How would you use this chapter to respond to people who say that God's judgement cannot exist because good people would not be happy knowing about the on-going suffering of others?
- Why is God just in ultimately giving us what we want?

In Chapter 19, heaven prepares to invade earth (described in chapter 21) and this has military and political implications that the nations of the world are well aware of. No longer is God's kingdom 'not of this world' (as Jesus said to Pilate in John 19:36) but God's will *is* about to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We have encountered Jesus as the rider on the white horse before in 6:2 where his gospel went forth to conquer in the midst of the suffering of this world.

- Whose blood is Jesus covered with as he goes into battle in Chapter 19?
- What is the significance of the sword being in his mouth rather than his hand?
- Why are the armies of heaven imitating Jesus (verse 14) and what are they dressed for (vs 7 & 8)?
- The preparation for a war is made but is a battle actually fought? Why?

Ironically there are two feasts in this chapter, that of the wedding guests and that of the birds of the air.

- What is symbolised by the slain remaining unburied for the birds to feast upon?

If chapter 19 rejoices over the end of temptation (Babylon), the end of the violence of the political/military system (the beast of the sea) and the end of false ideology (the false prophet/beast of the land) then chapter 20 deals with the source of evil himself: the Dragon.

See the notes in the *aside*, below, on interpreting the 1000-year reign of Christ in Chapter 20.

- Is it best to interpret the 1000 years literally or symbolically?
- From what you have already learnt from this book – what frustrates or binds Satan now?

The judgement scene depicts the victims of crime (murder) being placed as judges over their murderers and then reigning with Christ. This is called the first resurrection which has been interpreted as the resurrection of Jesus making possible an afterlife for God's people even before the resurrection of their bodies in the second resurrection.

- Is the surrounded city in verse 9 a figure for God's people (the church, the woman, the bride) or the literal Jerusalem (as some interpreters claim) or the new Jerusalem (21:2)?
- Who finally rescues God's people?
- How would you use this chapter to respond to those who claim that the final judgement puts the powers of evil (and the people who have been seduced by them) to death – that they are annihilated and have no conscious experience of ongoing judgement?
- Why would we choose an eternity of sin rather than an eternity in God's presence?

Revelation 19 & 20 - The end of time

Hell cannot exist...but...

The roar of heaven – the end of temptation

The wedding feast and the war

The feast of the birds – the end of violence, oppression and falsehood

The millennium reign of the martyrs

The frustration of Satan

The end of evil

There is nowhere to run

Aside: The Millennium (Chapter 20)

This is only one place in the Bible that mentions a thousand-year reign of God's people over Satan's influences. The passage has been interpreted in various ways throughout church history but has been controversial since Protestants saw in this passage the overthrow of Roman Catholicism. For some - the dragon, beast, false prophet, harlot and anti-Christ all in one! The end of Roman Catholicism, it was thought, would lead to an improvement of the world situation and the triumphal spread of (Protestant) Christianity. This theological idea was used to justify many things from the courageous missionary endeavours of the 19th century, to the emancipation of slaves, to pushing forward with the discoveries of science, to wars against American Indians, the Catholic empires of France and the Spain. This idea was also taken up in the early American thought that in their republic was the dawning of the millennium (20:6).

It is odd in a book where numbers are used symbolically that some would think that a literal meaning for 1000 years will make sense of this passage. After all, we have encountered the 1000 symbol in chapter 7, where $12 \times 12 \times 1000 =$ the full number of God's people. Using that symbolism, the millennium in chapter 20 would represent the full time of the martyr's reign in 20:4. This works well with chapter 6 where we were taught that the 1000-year reign is the reign of the martyrs under the altar of heaven during this current age. Chapter 20:9 tells us that the 1000-year reign is not the new creation of chapter 21 rather, 20:7-10 implies this chapter is another perspective on the rebellion depicted in 19:17-21. In short, the 1000-year reign is now. The age of the church is part of the frustration and defeat of Satan.

The three major views of the millennium are:

The pessimist's view - Premillennialism

Christ's return is followed by a 1000-year reign on earth, then rebellion, and then the final judgement.

This view was popular with some in the early church up through the middle ages – things will get more difficult on the earth until the return of Christ.

The optimist's view - Postmillennialism

The world improves as the church gains power, the saints reign for a long time, and then Christ returns.

This view was popular with Protestants, especially Puritans, who saw in the European upheavals, that started in the 16th Century, signs of the end of the age. When this was combined with the optimism springing from the advances of science and politics it led to the view that all things were changing for the better.

The realist's view - Amillennialism

The book of Revelation does not recount consecutive events, but the same time variously described, until the final judgement in 20:11-15. This view, most clearly expounded by Augustine of Hippo, sees Satan as bound by the cross of Christ and that the thousand-year reign of the martyrs is yet another metaphor for the current age between the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and his coming again.

Chapters 21 & 22

As earlier in this book the images are deliberately mixed because Jesus, in this Revelation to John, wants to describe what something means rather than what something looks like. This is why the coming of God's kingdom is described as a new creation (an improved Eden), a bride and a city. Each of these images expands on important Old Testament themes: creation and the threat of uncreation (Genesis), the establishment of God's kingdom and, eventually, the establishment of Jerusalem as the capital city of the world (Exodus through to Isaiah), the wedding feast as an image of God's love and longing for his people (Ezekiel, Song of Songs, Hosea, Jesus in the gospels, to name a few).

What is happening in these chapters is that all the promises of God are finding their "YES" in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20). All the promise of Eden of eternal life, of the open presence of God, of shameless community, of nature and humanity at peace together and supporting each other. All the promises to Abraham to bless the nations of the fallen world through his descendants by bringing them back to God. All the promises of righteous and clean, whole and successful lives held out to God's people in the law of Moses. All the promise of leadership, wealth, security and community given to King David and Jerusalem. All the promises of God to be our God and we his people. (Exodus 25:8, Lev 26:9-13, Ezk 37:27-28, Jer 31:33, John 1:14 & 10:16 ...).

In chapter 21, the old creation is *not* thrown into the lake of fire but simply passes away. It dies.

- From your reading of Revelation so far – what is the significance of there being no sea in the new creation?
- Why does it take the presence of God with his people for healing to occur? (21:3,4; 22:2)
- Jesus often spoke of water as a metaphor for the Spirit of God (See, for example, John 3, 4 & 7:37-39). In these chapters there is an allusion to the waters that flowed out of Eden to water the earth (Genesis 2:10-14). What do the waters that flow from the New Jerusalem accomplish for the world? (21:6, 22:1)

The New Jerusalem is depicted as the capital city of the world with nations still living outside the city (see Isaiah 65).

- The kings of the nations were destroyed in chapter 19 (verse 21) but here are bringing their wealth into Jerusalem. What has happened to the kingdoms of the world?
- Is the wealth they bring a tribute, tax or gift?
- What is the significance of Jerusalem being made of precious jewels and metals and yet it is transparent and full of light – even its foundations, which are normally hidden, are seen?

The only other cube in the Bible is the Holy of Holies where the high priest went once a year to offer sacrifices for himself and for the people. The holy of holies and the holy place, which surrounded it, was paved in the purest gold.

- What is the significance of describing the New Jerusalem as a massive cube, paved with purest gold, yet with huge gates that are always open to the nations of the world?
- Why is there no temple in the new Jerusalem?

The judgement of people is described with various metaphors in these last four chapters of Revelation as: a lake of fire, the second death, not being found in the lamb's book of life and being excluded from the city like an unclean animal. I think the most telling description, however, is found in 22:10-15 (see also Isaiah 66:22-24).

- Is there an ongoing life for those who are judged?
- What are the marks of that life?
- Are those who have chosen judgement wanting to repent and enter the city?
- Why is the last word of this prophecy a call for the church now to worship and a warning not to alter or obscure the prophecy?

The church, God's people, will be honoured by the nations of the world. Not marginalised or persecuted as we see currently. For a small church in the first century this vision of Jesus Christ given to John was immensely encouraging. To see this world as God sees it we need to know that the church is at the centre of his purposes for everything. That is why we can persist in patience (14:12) in a world marked with tragedy and rebellion against what is good for us. Yet, even so, come Lord Jesus!

Aside: The best and worst we that we are

People concerned with Architecture, Art and the best of human achievement have looked to these chapters for ideas to inspire design.

- What ideas do these chapters give you for combining what God has made with the best of what humanity has made?
- What makes the luxuries of the harlot Babylon ugly compared to the translucent wealth of Jerusalem and how do we avoid the former in our own art and design?

No human hand makes this city and yet the best things we can create are brought to it to enrich it.

- What is the significance of the harmony between what is grown and what is built in the New Jerusalem? (Genesis 3:13-20).

The history of the human city is not a glorious one (Genesis 4:17, Genesis 11...) but in the new creation God has not ignored human achievement but redeemed it.

- How may God redeem our work?

The Lamb and his Bride - Revelation 21 & 22

When words fail us

There is encouragement and warning

About our future

For all the promises of God find their "YES" in Christ Jesus

While the vile continue to do what is vile

Even so; Come Lord Jesus.