



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: Revelation, Part 1 Theme: Call to Arms

Overview: Randy Harris of Abilene Christian University has a good outline of the Book of Revelation: "Point # 1: God's team wins. Point # 2: You get to pick a team. Point # 3: Don't be stupid." Not bad. The Book that never uses the word "hope" is filled with it. The call for endurance and the promise of victory could not be clearer. In this study, students will learn that the only way to get to worship in heaven (Revelation 4-5) is to go through Jesus (Revelation 1) and his church (Revelation 2-3).

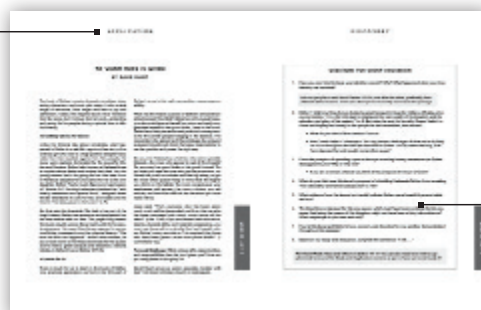
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

INTRODUCTION

Author and Audience

The New Testament book of Revelation stands as Scripture's final word—both a culmination of God's redemptive story and a pastoral letter to believers living between Christ's ascension and his return. Written by the apostle John, exiled on the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus," Revelation was addressed to seven real congregations in Asia Minor. These churches faced pressures familiar to every generation of Christians: cultural compromise, spiritual fatigue, persecution, and the temptation to lose heart. John writes as a shepherd apostle, strengthening believers to endure faithfully in a world that often opposes the reign of Christ.

Date

Most conservative scholars date the book around AD 95 during the reign of Domitian, a period marked by increasing hostility toward Christians.

Setting

Yet Revelation's setting is not merely historical; it is cosmic. John is invited to see earthly events from heaven's vantage point. What appears chaotic on the ground is revealed to be ordered under the sovereign rule of the risen Lamb. The book's visions unveil the true nature of

the age between Christ's first and second comings—a time in which the church is called to patient endurance while Christ advances his kingdom.

Theme

The central theme of Revelation is the victory of Jesus Christ. The Lamb who was slain now reigns, and his triumph shapes the entire book. Evil is real, but it is not ultimate. The church suffers, but it is never abandoned. History moves not in circles but toward a consummation in which God dwells with his people and makes all things new. Revelation portrays this present age as the arena of spiritual conflict and gospel advance, culminating in Christ's visible return and the final judgment.

Why Study Revelation?

Because it grounds weary believers in hope. It reminds us that the church's story is anchored not in fear, speculation, or political turmoil but in the unshakable reign of Christ. Revelation trains us to see our world truthfully—to recognize both the deceptive allure of Babylon and the quiet, steady victory of the Lamb. It calls us to worship, to perseverance, and to confidence that God's purposes will stand. Far from being a book to avoid, Revelation is a gift to the church: a promise that no matter how dark the night, the morning of new creation is certain.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1: Revelation 1:1-20

WEEK 2: Revelation 2:1-17

WEEK 3: Revelation 3:1-22

WEEK 4: Revelation 4:1-11

WEEK 5: Revelation 5:1-14

WEEK ONE

LESSON AIM: **Take to heart what is written.**

STUDY: Revelation, Part 1

THEME: Call to Arms

LESSON TEXT: Revelation 1:1-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Nehemiah 8:2-3, 7-12; Matthew 4:17; 5:6; 17:4-8;
Revelation 22:7-17

HEAR HIM

BY MARK SCOTT

President Matt Proctor of Ozark Christian College led the 2013 NACC in Louisville, Kentucky. He preached the opening session and taught from Revelation 1. His big idea was, “Never, ever, ever underestimate Jesus.” If people really hear and see Jesus, they will never underestimate him. The apostle John saw and heard Jesus (1:10), and he wanted the seven churches in western Turkey to see and hear him too (1:11).

Hear Him to Be Blessed (1-3)

This last book of the Bible is not as much about charts, predictions, and world events as it is about Jesus. The very first phrase says, “*The revelation from Jesus Christ*.” The phrase can be translated “from Jesus” or “about Jesus.” Both are true. The *revelation* (unveiling) that John received from God was about Jesus. God gave this revelation to John to share with believers in the churches of western Turkey.

The means of communicating this message to John was through an angel. John’s congregations were going to encounter tough days ahead, so God wanted to help them prepare. Some things would take place soon *because the time was near* (though John never identified what time he was talking about). John was in the Alcatraz of the Ancient Near East (*the island of Patmos*—offshore from Ephesus). John was there because of his preaching of the Word of God (i.e., gospel) and his testimony (1:2, 9). But even though there were challenges, John pronounced a blessing on the person who would read and heed (i.e., *hear it and take it to heart*), his prophecy (i.e., speaking/writing an inspired message from God). This is the first of several beatitudes in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). To hear Jesus is to bless him, and he turns around and blesses us.

Hear Him to Be Free (4-8)

This greeting and doxology is filled with significant theology—not the least of which is how Christ has set us free from our sins. The apostle John later identified himself to the recipients as *a brother and companion in the suffering* that the believers were experiencing (1:9). He addressed his symbolic prophecy to *the seven churches in the province of Asia*. John was the writer, but the revelation itself was from the God who knows no verb tense (*who is, and who was, and who is to come*)—see also vs. 8. The prophecy was inspired by the Holy Spirit (identified as *the seven spirits*, symbolic of the complete work of the Holy Spirit). And the Father and the Son work in conjunction with Jesus who was identified as *faithful*, resurrected, and sovereign over kingly authorities.

Praise is given to Jesus because of his love which motivated him to liberate his followers with his blood-bought atonement. The word *freed* is from a Greek word that means “loosed.” Jesus loosed us from our sins. Once this happened he made those liberated into a *kingdom* and allowed them to serve him as *priests* (cf. Exodus 19:6). These redeemed will rejoice at his return to earth a second time (Hebrews 9:28). Using a loose quotation from Zechariah 12:10, John recorded that Jesus would come with the clouds (Acts 1:9-11). In addition, everyone will witness this cosmic event—even those who killed Jesus. People who really hear Jesus can be freed by him. After all, he is the beginning and the end of everything (*Alpha and Omega*).

Hear Him Because of Who He Is (9-20)

Before John got to the churches (Rev. 2-3), before he witnessed heavenly worship (Rev. 4-5), before he witnessed the judgments of God (Rev. 6-11), before he uncovered the devilish intent behind why the world is as it is (Rev. 12-19), and even before he saw into the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21-22), he saw Jesus (1:9-20). This is not the humble carpenter from Nazareth of Galilee. This is the resurrected Son of God who “could play kickball with our planet” (Matt Proctor).

Even though John was suffering exile and having to patiently endure difficult days with the rest of the first-century believers, he had a revelation of Jesus Christ on Sunday (*the Lord’s Day*). God wanted him to tell the seven churches about this magnificent Christ. Jesus spiritually moved among the seven churches. He was the fulfillment of the one who executed the mission of that Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9-14). He was kingly in his dress, wise beyond measure, pure as wool, and piercing in his knowledge of people. He was stable like bronze, and his voice sounded like Niagara Falls. His hand-held stars (angels or messengers), and his face shone like the sun. What a picture!

What else could John do but fall down *as though dead*? Jesus comforted John with his right hand and with his powerful presence (first and last, dead though now alive, and holding the keys to *death and Hades*). If we really hear him, we will never underestimate him.

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WHAT CHRISTIANS DO

BY DAVID FAUST

The New Testament portrays the first-century church with stark realism, and the picture isn't always pretty.

The twelve apostles quarreled about who was the greatest. Ananias and Sapphira were greedy and dishonest. Immature, divisive members of the Corinthian church misunderstood key doctrines and engaged in appalling immorality. Barnabas and Paul disagreed sharply about Mark's missionary role.

At the Feet of the Perfect Christ

Many today have a negative view of Christians. Skeptics consider us hypocrites—weak-minded phonies who use God for a crutch. Politicians try to use us as a voting bloc, moviemakers (and some history teachers) cast us as villains, and culture watchers point out the church's waning influence on society.

However, the world doesn't define Christians; Jesus does. We imperfect sinners cast ourselves at the feet of the perfect Christ and discover that while *Christian* is a noun, our lives are characterized by verbs like *trust, follow, love, go, teach, work, rest, give, pray, forgive, and persevere*. Grace is free and salvation can't be earned, but God designed us to do good works (Ephesians 2:8-10). The church's inspired history book is called the book of Acts, not the book of Good Intentions.

Infused with Purpose

Jesus' first-century disciples fished and farmed, collected taxes, and made tents—but a sense of purpose infused their daily routines even when faith brought them persecution. Today Jesus' followers bring the kingdom with them to schools, offices, farms, and factories where we love our neighbors and live purposefully for God—even when our faith puts us in uncomfortable positions.

The final book of the Bible is about God and what he does, but it also shows what Christians do.

Christians serve. God gave the book of Revelation "to show his servants what must soon take place," and revealed the message "to his servant John" (1:1). Christians are servants, here to do the Master's bidding. Christ "has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (1:6).

Christians suffer. God's people aren't immune to adversity; we expect it but triumph through it. John himself was exiled to the island of Patmos because he dared to testify about God's Word. He wrote as a "brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (1:9). Throughout Revelation the Lord encourages his suffering followers to persevere. Seven churches scattered around Asia Minor received seven exhortations urging them to overcome and be "victorious" (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

Christians shine. The risen Lord Jesus "walks among the seven golden lampstands" (2:1), which represent the seven churches (1:20). The Lord walks among the churches, observing what takes place in each one. A lampstand produces no light; it merely lifts up the light. If the sun stops shining, the moon will go dark; and if a church stops lifting up Christ, it will grow dark.

The book of Revelation reminds us that, even in tumultuous times, imperfect Christians can serve, suffer, and shine for the Master. In the mundane and the magnificent, the day-to-day and the once-in-a-lifetime—we hear the unwavering voice of the glorified Christ and praise him for filling our lives with purpose. Earth's turmoil can't prevent us from joining heaven's song and declaring, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (4:11).

Personal Challenge:

There is a lot of darkness in our world today. How does the light of Christ make your life brighter? How are you shining his light to others?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When in your life did Jesus Christ become real to you? Briefly share that story with your group.

Ask two people to read aloud **Revelation 1:1-20**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. Although John was already intimately acquainted with Jesus, the revelation he received from the Lord through an angel on the island of Patmos must have been a tremendous encouragement to him in his exile. In what ways today does the Lord remind us that he is with us and for us?
3. The greeting and doxology remind us that Jesus "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Revelation 1:5). What does this mean to you personally?
4. Jesus described himself to John as "the Alpha and Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (1:8).
 - How do you think this brought comfort to John in his situation?
 - How does this same knowledge give us comfort in our circumstances?
5. John was instructed to write down what he was about to see and send the information to seven churches (1:11). What does this say about Jesus' love and concern for the local church?
6. John wrote that upon seeing Christ in all his splendor and glory, "I fell at his feet as though dead" (1:17).
 - How do you think you would react if you found yourself in the very presence of Christ?
 - How might a thought like this affect your perspective when you worship?
7. John saw a glorious vision of the resurrected Christ moving among seven golden lampstands (1:12-16). Later the seven golden lampstands are identified as the seven churches to whom John was to write (1:19-20). How does it affect your thoughts and actions to know that the Lord moves among his church?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Revelation 2:1-17**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Be faithful to the point of death.**

STUDY: Revelation, Part 1

THEME: Call to Arms

LESSON TEXT: Revelation 2:1-17

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Joshua 24:14-15; 1 Samuel 22:9-19; Mark 6:17-27; 2 Timothy 4:6-8

BE FAITHFUL

BY MARK SCOTT

Following the glorious vision of Jesus, John now looks at the church. John R. W. Stott calls it *What Christ Thinks of the Church*. Eugene Peterson reminds us that to get from Jesus (chapter 1) to heaven (chapters 4-5) you have to go through the church (chapters 2-3). In fact, faulty thinking is to think that you can have Jesus without his bride.

Most numbers in the book of Revelation are symbolic, but in chapters 2-3 there are seven literal churches. The number seven might stand for “all” the church, but seven churches of the first century A.D. are addressed individually. These churches have counterparts in all ages of the church, but they are probably not seven ages of the church. Christ is seen as walking among the churches (1:13; 2:1), but a few churches are in danger of Christ not continuing with them. They need to “be faithful.” Some nuance of Christ is mentioned to each church (e.g., Jesus’ eyes likened to flames of fire, 2:18), and all the churches are commended (except Laodicea), and all churches are condemned (except Smyrna).

Faithful . . . Yet . . . Love (1-7)

The first church addressed by Jesus via his angel (messenger) is in Ephesus. (The order of the churches addressed might follow the postal route of the ancient world.) Jesus does not fail in his omniscience. He “knows” their deeds, works, and perseverance (i.e. endurance). He also is aware of their concern for right doctrine. The church does not *tolerate* (bear up with) *wicked people*. The church has *tested* these supposed *apostles* and found them to be false. The church has *persevered* and has *not grown weary*. The church was excellent at hunting down heresies. This was evident by their hatred for the *Nicolaitans* (mentioned also in connection with the church in Pergamum, 2:15). Faithful in works, endurance, and doctrine—that was Ephesus.

Yet, the church had *forsaken the love they had at first*. Their heresy hunting had hardened them. They failed to love God first and most and love their neighbors as themselves. Jesus called them to *repent* (change). In fact, if they did not change he would *remove their lampstand from its place*. The Spirit still says this message to the churches today. “Lead with grace . . . land with truth” (Jon Weece). If they did this Eden would be opened to them (i.e., they would be privileged to eat from the tree of life again).

Faithful . . . To . . . Death (8-11)

The second church addressed is the church at Smyrna. This is the modern city of Izmir (third largest in Turkey at three million people). Interestingly enough, nothing bad

is said about this church. Jesus described himself to the church as the *First and the Last* and the one *who died and came to life again*. Once again Jesus’ omniscience is acknowledged. He knows that they have had *afflictions* (pressed down) and are fiscally poor. But spiritually speaking they were rich (abundant or plentiful). They were being slandered (blasphemed) but were standing strong against their adversaries.

Their adversaries were evidently Jews from the Diaspora. Instead of a “gathering for God,” they were a *synagogue of Satan*. The church would go through a time of testing. The devil was identified as the one behind that testing, and the persecution would be real but limited, i.e., 10 days (a complete but not lengthy time). The call was for faithfulness—even to the point of death. That kind of faithfulness would achieve the *victor’s crown*. This faithful church would by-pass the *second death* (eternal damnation, Rev. 20:6). Polycarp, an early church leader, was an elder here. He is well known for his statement prior to his martyrdom, “Eighty and six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I now blaspheme my king who saved me?”

Faithful . . . Nevertheless . . . Hold (12-17)

The third church addressed was Pergamum. The theater at this town has been excavated. It is large and very steep to climb. Below the city was a medical school, and today it is close to a rug factory. Jesus, the living word, gave the spoken word described as a *double-edged sword*.

This church had many challenges working against them. *Satan’s throne* was there (a reference to the imperial cult of worshipping Rome and its power, or a reference to the Temple of Asclepius?). One faithful saint who held on to his faith was *Antipas*. He was martyred.

An internal issue within this church was that some promoted pagan idolatry and influenced them in the direction of sexual immorality (thus the reference to *Balaam, Balak*, and the narratives in Numbers 22-25). Also, the *Nicolaitans*, mentioned in the letter to Ephesus, were infiltrating the church. The church was called to repent or taste the sword of Christ’s wrath. If they repented, they would experience fresh bread (i.e. manna) and a new identity (*white stone with a new name written on it*). Faithfulness has to be complete, eternal, and without compromise.

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NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE

BY DAVID FAUST

In Luke 14, Jesus told a story about a man who invited guests to a great banquet, but they rejected the invitation with a variety of excuses. “A real estate deal needs my attention.” “I bought some new oxen, and I must try them out.” “I’m a newlywed.”

Today’s rationalizations sound a bit different, but Jesus’ story rings true because we’re tempted to offer the Lord excuses of our own. “I’m too young (or too old). I’m busy. My family (or my job) requires all my attention. I’m worried about my health. I’m trying to make ends meet. I live in a rough neighborhood.” Non-discipleship never lacks for excuses.

Undying Love

First-century Ephesus was a rough place for Christians—a sanctuary city for criminals. Idolatry and immorality abounded, and the enormous temple of the goddess Artemis—425 feet long and 220 feet wide, with 127 pillars supporting its roof—dominated the city.

Today only the foundation and one column remain from the original temple, but the city’s first-century theatre still exists. That’s where a mob seized the apostle Paul and his companions, dragged them into the 25,000-seat theatre, and shouted, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:28-29). Artemis’s “greatness” didn’t last, though. When I visited Ephesus, I noticed a stork had built a nest on the temple’s only standing column.

Despite its problems, Paul considered Ephesus a strategic place for gospel influence. He taught there for two years, and God’s Word penetrated the surrounding area (Acts 19:8-10). The seven churches of Revelation likely were planted by new believers sent out from Ephesus who spread the gospel in their hometowns.

The Ephesian church was blessed with strong leadership in its early days. Paul’s protégé Timothy ministered there (1 Timothy 1:3). So did Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos (Acts 18:19-26). According to tradition, the apostle John spent the latter part of his life in Ephesus.

Paul closed his Ephesian letter by writing, “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (Ephesians 6:24). Decades later, though, the Lord gave the church a solemn warning, for as time passed, the believers were losing their first love (Revelation 2:4). Eventually the Ephesian church faded into the annals of history and its “lampstand” was removed.

No matter where we live—how hard we work, how many hardships we endure, or what noteworthy leaders we know—we must never forsake our love for Christ.

Unfading Faith

While in Turkey, I also visited Pergamum. Our tour group took a cable car to the top of an 1,100-foot-high hill and viewed the ruins of pagan temples, theatres, and intimidating Roman military installations that overshadowed first-century Christians like a threatening, devilish throne. Christ assured the believers in Pergamum, “I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name” (Revelation 2:13).

He knows where we live, too. He knows the challenges we face at work, home, and school. He sees our financial hardships, physical problems, emotional hurts, and interpersonal conflicts. He understands our fears and frustrations.

No matter where we are in life, instead of looking for excuses, we should follow Jesus. Through it all, his promise remains clear. “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown” (Revelation 2:10).

Personal Challenge:

Right now, what is the biggest threat to your faith in Christ? What temptation threatens to weaken “the love you had at first” for the Lord (Revelation 2:4)?

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When you hear the word, faithful, what person in your life comes to mind? Why?

Ask two people to read aloud **Revelation 2:1-17**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

2. The church in Ephesus was doing a lot of things right. What were they doing wrong (2:4)?
 - With all of their "rightness," what was still at risk (2:5)?
 - What does this say to you about the importance of loving God and others?
3. Facing poverty, slander, and persecution, how would you have felt if you had been a member of the church in Smyrna in John's day (2:9-10a)? How would the Lord's words of encouragement (2:10b-11) have helped you personally?
4. As a follower of Christ, what does it mean to be poor, yet rich (2:9)?
5. In John's vision of Christ (1:12-16), he saw "a sharp, double-edged sword" coming out of Jesus' mouth. In his words to the church in Pergamum, Jesus described himself as "him who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (2:12).
 - What is the significance of the double-edged sword?
 - What does this say about the authority and impact of Jesus' words?
6. Living in a city where Satan had a stronghold (2:13), the Christians in Pergamum remained true to Christ and steadfast in the faith. But while grounded in their own understanding, they also seemed to tolerate false teaching by others (2:14-16). How is this kind of tolerance dangerous even within a firmly grounded church?
7. Commenting on Revelation 2:17, lesson writer Mark Scott says about the church in Pergamum, "If they repented, they would experience fresh bread (i.e. manna) and a new identity (white stone with a new name written on it)."
 - Is it possible for an entire church to repent of wrongdoing?
 - How do you think that could work?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Revelation 3:1-22**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Obey what you have received.**

STUDY: Revelation, Part 1

THEME: Call to Arms

LESSON TEXT: Revelation 3:1-22

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Deuteronomy 6:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 5:6-11; 2 Peter 3:10

OBEY AND OVERCOME

BY MARK SCOTT

David Erickson said, “Jesus was married.” Of course he was speaking of the church as Jesus’ bride. He went on to say, “I hear they have been having trouble—Jesus and his bride. If you ask me, I think it’s her fault.” Indeed. Jesus is the perfect husband. His bride, on the other hand, struggles with perfection. We always live with two churches—the one that is, and the one we would like to see. That is evident in Revelation 2-3.

As Jesus addressed his angels (messengers) in his churches we see a kaleidoscope of different images about him. He holds the *seven spirits of God and the seven stars* (1). He *holds the key of David* (7). He is the *faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation* (14). We also hear the promises he made to these churches. For *Sardis*, he promised to *never blot out* their names from *the book of life* (5). For *Philadelphia*, he promised to make them a *pillar in the temple of God* and to *write on them the name of my God* (12). For *Laodicea*, he promised them to *sit with him on his throne* (21).

Waking Up (1-6)

The challenge for Sardis was to wake up. Having a *reputation* (name) of being alive is not the same as really being alive. This church was “mostly dead,” spiritually speaking. They had some spiritual fire still in them, but it was about to be extinguished. So many of their works were *unfinished* (not complete or full). Jesus called them to hold the gospel *fast* (guard it or keep it) and repent.

There was hope for this sleepy church, though. A *few people* (most churches always have a few of those) had *not soiled their clothes*. This probably referred to walking in moral excellence since it is contrasted with being dressed in *white* (a symbol of purity). Believers are privileged with being clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Those people are *victorious and acknowledge* (confess) Jesus’ name before heaven.

Opening Doors (7-13)

Each of the cities in Revelation 2-3 have unique attributes that make Jesus’ messages to their churches especially meaningful. This is certainly true of Philadelphia. The ancient city of Philadelphia is within the modern city of Alasehir, which is about 30 miles from Sardis. While the city gates (doors) have been destroyed, the pillars that held those gates are ginormous. One can only im-

agine what the doors must have been like. Not surprisingly, then, Jesus addressed this church in terms of keys and doors.

This church was laden with opportunity. God had opened a door for them even though they had *little strength*. Like the church in Smyrna, this church was mostly commended. They *kept* (guarded) God’s word and did not *deny* his name. Also, similar to the church in Smyrna, the Jews were persecuting the believers (i.e., synagogue of Satan). But God would protect his church by humbling their persecutors and by sparing the church *the hour of trial* that was coming (i.e., a relatively short time of suffering). The church was urged to hold on and hold out for the day when the *new Jerusalem* would come down out of heaven and swallow them up.

Spitting Out (14-22)

The church that has nothing good said about it is last on the postal route. Laodicea was halfway between Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis had hot springs (the white silt can be seen to this day). The water from Hierapolis would be piped (flowed on an aqueduct—which can also be seen today) to Laodicea. But by the time it got there it was tepid (neither hot nor cold). This topography gave rise to how Jesus framed up his rebuke of this church.

Laodicea is still being excavated today, but the church needed their pride excavated. They boasted of being *rich*, having wealth and having no needs. Laodicea was known as a banking center of the area. They also boasted of having 20/20 eyesight, but Jesus said they were blind. Laodicea was known for a special eye salve that was supposed to cure blindness. They also boasted of being fully clothed, but Jesus said that they were naked. Laodicea was famous for their black wool used in clothing.

Jesus assured them of his love, which prompted his rebuke and discipline of them. The picture of Jesus standing at the door “of the church” and knocking is sobering. He desired to share intimately with this church, to give them victory, and to grant them close proximity to himself. But they had to be willing.

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DON'T CLOSE YOURSELF OFF

BY DAVID FAUST

We live in a fearful, closed-off world where homes, cars, storefronts, and even church buildings have locks and alarms for security reasons. In scary times like these, Jesus' letters to three churches in Revelation 3 remind God's people to keep our hearts open for business.

Sardis: Open Your Eyes

"Wake up!" That's what Christ told the believers in first-century Sardis (Revelation 3:2). Like a bugler playing "Reveille" to wake up soldiers in the morning, the Lord wanted to shake his followers out of slumber.

The church in Sardis had a positive reputation, but it was spiritually lifeless. Revelation 3:1-6 mentions no blatant heresy, no flagrant immorality, no unusual threat of persecution. Satan apparently didn't need to level an all-out attack on the believers in Sardis. All he had to do was rock their cradle and keep them dozing, napping, and snoozing when they should have been active, doing God's will.

The Lord wants us to wake up—to open our eyes, repent of our laziness, and recognize our God-given opportunities.

Philadelphia: Look for the Open Door

The Lord had no rebuke for the Christians in Philadelphia. Instead, he encouraged them by saying, "I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut" (Revelation 3:8).

Has someone ever slammed a door in your face? Closed doors can be discouraging. How will you react if you lose your job, a friend or a relative walks away, or your health takes a nosedive? When you drive to a distant city, you don't expect the traffic signals to stay green all the way. Some lights will be yellow or red. If you must slow down and stop for a while, you don't have to give up on the journey. Even when it looks like you're hitting a wall, the

Lord often opens doors for faith to grow and the gospel to spread. The apostle Paul faced a lot of opposition, but he said, "A great door for effective work has opened to me" (1 Corinthians 16:9).

Laodicea: Open the Door of Your Heart

In Philadelphia, the believers needed to look for the door God was opening; but in Laodicea the Christians themselves needed to open a door.

While traveling in Turkey, I visited the site of Laodicea and saw the remains of stone houses, marketplaces, and temples. That same day, our tour bus took us to nearby Hierapolis, where modern visitors still bathe in hot mineral springs, and to the site of first-century Colosse, which has not been excavated. (Our tour of Colosse mainly involved walking across a hilltop covered with thistles.) Nearby, though, the guide showed us a cold-water creek. With hot springs and a cold-water stream nearby, it's easy to see why Jesus used lukewarm water (neither hot nor cold) to illustrate the apathy of the Laodicean Christians (Revelation 3:15-16).

The Lord finds apathy unappetizing. But instead of writing off his lukewarm followers, he offers a challenging invitation: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20). Evidently in Laodicea, Jesus was on the outside, trying to gain entrance to his own church!

The Lord doesn't force his way in. He knocks. He calls. He invites. He wants to come in and spend time with us at a table of fellowship, but we must open the door.

Personal Challenge:

What door of opportunity has the Lord opened for you in the past? What door is he opening to you now?

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Share with your group one considerable obstacle you have overcome—or are overcoming—in your life. How does being an overcomer make you feel?

Ask two people to read aloud **Revelation 3:1-22**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize these verses.

2. On the surface the church in Sardis appeared to be alive (thriving), but in reality it was dead (3:1b).
 - Jesus said about them, “I know your deeds” (3:1a).
 - What does this say to you about outward appearance vs. inward obedience?
3. Jesus said to the church in Philadelphia that he had placed before them “an open door that no one can shut” (3:8).
 - Does this give you confidence when you think about the opportunities the Lord has placed before you?
 - Does it encourage you to pray with boldness? Explain.
4. Jesus promised the church, “I am coming soon,” and added, “Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown” (3:11).
 - How can faithful followers of Christ hold on to what we have today?
5. Lesson writer Mark Scott describes the church in Laodicea as “the church that has nothing good said about it.”
 - Why do you think a lukewarm church (neither hot nor cold) is so detestable to the Lord?
 - What do you think makes a church lukewarm?
6. Sadly, the Christians in Laodicea had little, if any, spiritual self-awareness. They considered themselves rich while they were poor, able to see while they were blind, and well-dressed while they were naked.
 - What does this say to you about the need for self-examination in the Christian life?
 - How should the process of self-examination be worked out in our lives?
7. Amid their flaws, Jesus held out the hope of victory for each of the three churches in Revelation 3 (vv. 5, 12, and 21).
 - What does this say to you about the hope of the church today?
 - What does it say to you about hope in your own life?

8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: “I will . . .”

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Revelation 4:1-11**. You can also read next week’s supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Worship him who lives forever.**

STUDY: Revelation, Part 1

THEME: Call to Arms

LESSON TEXT: Revelation 4:1-11

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Isaiah 6:1-4; Daniel 7:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:15-18

WORSHIP GOD

BY MARK SCOTT

The lesson title is a command. David said it (1 Chronicles 16:29; Psalm 29:2). The psalmist said it (Psalm 96:9). The angel said it—twice (Revelation 19:10; 22:9). And Jesus said it (Matthew 4:10; John 4:24). Why is it so important? Because we become what we worship (Hosea 9:10b).

The Bible reveals more than one unique worship setting (e.g., Exodus 40:34-38; 1 Kings 8:62-66; Ezra 3:10-13; Isaiah 6:1-13; 2 Corinthians 12:1-4). But hardly any passage equals the power and glory of what John saw in Revelation 4-5. With the help of the Spirit, John saw the glory of the Father in chapter four. And with the help of the scroll, John saw the glory of the sacrificial lamb in chapter five. The glories of heaven would strengthen the troubled believers on earth.

Worship God for He Is Glorious (1-6a)

After this referred to after John saw the condition of the seven churches—not seven ages of the church. It is a phrase similar to “And I saw,” which occurs throughout Revelation. John saw an open door to a vision of a heavenly worship scene. He also heard a familiar voice (1:12). The voice was loud, *like a trumpet*. This indicates power. Trumpets were used to announce feast days as well as to announce battle commands. The voice told John to “Come up here.” Some take this to refer to some kind of rapture of the saints, but that over stresses the language, and the command is to John, not to the church. What would happen following the vision of Christ and his churches is this throne-room vision.

When John claimed to be *in the Spirit*, he was claiming inspiration to tell this vision without error. What occupied his attention was this *throne* (mentioned eleven times in chapter 4). This was central to the vision. More than God sat on thrones in this book, but the description was too glorious to be anyone but God. The description is stunning. The appearance was like jewels surrounded by a rainbow (i.e., promise to remind God not to flood the world again—Genesis 9). Around this central throne were *twenty-four other thrones* on which *twenty-four elders* sat (symbolic of Old Testament Israel and New Testament Israel). These were pure (dressed in white) and had crowns on their heads (Genesis 46:8-25; Matthew 19:28). All kinds of cosmic signs broke out indicating power—i.e. lightning, thunder, lamps, and a sea of glass clear as crystal. Even if all the images in these verses are

not teased out with clear identifiable meanings, the overall scene is glorious.

Worship God for He Is Holy and Worthy (6b-11)

John moved from telescope to microscope. He noticed what was closer to the throne. They were identified as *four living creatures*. There was a *lion* (wild animals), an *ox* (domestic animals), a *man* (or face like one—human beings), and an *eagle* (flying animals). This may be a way of speaking of all creation worshipping God. Daniel used similar images with different referents—symbolizing governments. One interpretative insight would be that John draws upon Old Testament imagery, but does not use it the same way as the Old Testament writers. These creatures had six eyes and six wings (one shy of the perfect and complete number of seven—indicating that they were not equal to God). Rather they worshiped God. But the eyes symbolized their awareness of what they were doing. The wings indicated mobility, and worship for the one on the throne was coming from everywhere.

The worship service being described seemed to be unending. This was also indicated by the phrase *day and night*. In words reminiscent of Isaiah 6, the living creatures say, “*Holy, holy, holy.*” This is the only virtue of God repeated to the third power—one praise of holiness for each member of the triune God since he is called *Lord God Almighty*.

When the living creatures in closest proximity to God offer up this praise, the twenty-four elders take their cue and fall down and worship the one on the throne. They even go beyond this. They lay down their royal crowns *before the throne*. This acknowledged that the one on the throne was the King of kings. Then they cry out the worthiness of God. He is the one in the universe who should receive *glory and honor and power*. The reason for this praise went back to Genesis 1. God as Creator is being acknowledged. The elders affirm that God created all things by his divine will and that these created things have their being from him. Eugene Peterson would say, “Glory, glory, glory.”

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APPLICATION

MAKING WORSHIP A WAY OF LIFE

BY DAVID FAUST

If you randomly survey 1,000 people, how many of them do you suppose would say, "Worshiping God is a high priority in my life"?

Our word *worship* comes from the Old English "worth-ship." It's an indicator of what we value, prioritize, and consider worthwhile. Judging by the daily news and social media, the main issues worth our attention are money, entertainment, politics, employment, health and safety, sports, weather, and cultural debates. But what about the Lord? How can we make worshiping God a priority—and a way of life?

In Revelation chapter four, John peered inside heaven's door and beheld an astonishing scene. What he saw should impact the way we worship the Lord.

What Worship Isn't

Worship isn't a spectator sport for passive onlookers. It's a participatory activity that engages our minds, hearts, and bodies in praising God. John was fully engaged. He "looked," he "heard," and he was personally "in the Spirit" (Revelation 4:1-2).

Worship is not a Sunday-only activity. John's grand vision came to him "on the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10), but the things he saw and wrote about are relevant every day of the week. Worshiping God should be a way of life where we honor and serve him in all of our activities, doing it all "for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Worship is far more than going through the motions, fulfilling religious customs, and critiquing sermons and songs based on our personal preferences. In fact, it's not primarily about us at all. It's about praising "the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8).

True worship isn't boring! John surely didn't yawn with indifference when he gazed inside heaven's door. The scene apparently engaged his senses, challenged his intellect, and stirred his emotions. He heard thunder rumbling and voices praising God. He saw brilliant

colors, "a sea of glass, clear as crystal" (v. 6), and mysterious angelic beings whose appearance boggled the mind.

Contrary to a common misunderstanding in today's church, worship isn't mainly about music. However, the longest book in the Bible is a songbook, so it's fitting to praise the Lord and "extol him with music and song" (Psalm 95:2).

Worship is more than listening to a preacher talk. Timothy was supposed to devote himself to "the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13), but his job also included guiding others to pray and revere "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light" (1 Timothy 2:1-2, 2:8, 6:15-16).

Rearranging Our Priorities

The first of the Ten Commandments says, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Worship compels us to lay aside our idols, release our attachment to this world and its fleeting distractions, and seek God and his kingdom first.

The Lord watches over all our "coming and going" (Psalm 121:8), so we can worship him anytime, anywhere—at home, work, and school. Whether alone outdoors or joining with hundreds of others in a building designed for worship, we can fall down before our Creator and declare, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" (Revelation 4:11).

Personal Challenge:

During a typical day, how often do you remember to worship God? What steps could you take to make worship a more consistent part of your daily life?

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DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Think back to a specific time of worship when you felt especially close to and in awe of God. What about that time made it significant to you?

Ask two people to read aloud **Revelation 4:1-11**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize these verses.

2. Lesson writer Mark Scott observes, "After this [Revelation 4:1] referred to after John saw the condition of the seven churches."
 - How does the contrast between the state of the seven churches on earth (Revelation 2-3) and the state of the glorious throne room of God in heaven (Revelation 4) speak to you about God's authority and reign?
3. Reread the description John provides of the one sitting on a throne in heaven (4:2-3).
 - What does John's description say to you about God's glory, beauty, and splendor?
 - Why do you think John used images of precious stones in his description?
4. John saw 24 additional thrones surrounding the throne of God (4:4).
 - What does the presence of the elders on these thrones suggest to you?
 - What do their white garments and crowns suggest?
5. At the center of the scene, John saw four more beings surrounding God's throne (4:6-8a). Scott notes, "There was a lion (wild animals), an ox (domestic animals), a man (or face like one—human beings), and an eagle (flying animals). This may be a way of speaking of all creation worshipping God."
 - We understand the worship of human beings, but how do you think all creation worships God?
 - In what ways does God's creation lead us to worship?
6. Night and day, the four creatures continually offer praise and worship to God (4:8b).
 - How does your awareness of God's holiness lead you to worship?
 - How does your awareness of God's eternality ("was, and is, and is to come") lead you to worship?
7. Chapter 4 concludes with an acknowledgement of God's worthiness to receive worship.
 - How is God worthy of your worship?
 - Share your response with your group.
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Revelation 5:1-14**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FIVE

LESSON AIM: **Worship the lamb who was slain.**

STUDY: Revelation, Part 1

THEME: Call to Arms

LESSON TEXT: Revelation 5:1-14

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Isaiah 53:7; Daniel 7:13-14; Mark 10:15; Luke 24:50-51; John 1:29; Acts 1:9-11

BOW DOWN

BY MARK SCOTT

Worship in heaven is on-going. It never ends—and never gets old. That is why the transition between chapters four and five is smooth. What started in chapter four continued in chapter five. We move from the throne (and the one seated upon it) in chapter four to the scroll (and the one who can open it) in chapter five.

The Scroll (1-4)

The chapter began with the words *“Then I saw.”* Many chapters in Revelation begin with that phrase. John was taking notes as fast as he could and was pushing language to the breaking point. John was very observant and noticed that the scroll had *writing on both sides* (symbolic of being a very full message) and *sealed with seven seals*. This was a common thing in the ancient world. Documents would be sealed with wax and the king’s signet ring would be pushed down into the wax to make an official “stamp.” The fact that there were seven seals shows the secure nature of the document.

Next a *mighty angel*, in contrast with the myriads of angels mentioned later (11), proclaimed (preached) in a *loud voice* (similar to 1:10?), *“Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”* If “throne” was the key word in chapter four, then “worthy” is the key word in chapter five. The word occurs four times in 14 verses. The word referred to what was weighty or of great value and was used in terms of scales and weighing things.

A search was made through the universe for one weighty enough to break the seals and open the scroll. The search came up empty. No one was worthy. This caused John great distress because he knew that the message on the scroll would be kept hidden if the seals could not be broken. John *wept and wept*. The expression meant to lament to the point of showing it outwardly.

The Lamb (5-8)

John’s lament was met by an elder’s assurance. A worthy one was found who could break the seals and open the scroll. He was a *lion* who was also a *lamb*. This lion is from the *tribe of Judah* and is also the *Root of David*. There is no question that this is *Messiah Jesus* (Genesis 49:8-10; John 1:29). In fact, this would be the last time that Jesus would be identified in Revelation as a lion. But this is no mere kitty cat. This lion/lamb caused people to run for the hills in fear (6:16-17).

The elders told John that the lamb had triumphed (conquered—and the verb tense indicated that the conquering has already taken place). Due to his victory (in the cross and resurrection?) this lamb can break the seals, open the scroll, and reveal the message on the scroll.

The lamb showed signs of having been slain already. The verb tense again matters. The lamb was slain sometime in the past, but the results of that sacrifice were on-going. The lamb was standing front and center at the throne. To look upon the one on the throne was also to look on the one before the throne. The elders and the living creatures encircled this lamb. The lamb had *seven horns and seven eyes*—a symbol of complete power and omniscience. These eyes are the *seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth* (probably indicative of the Spirit of God working to point people to Jesus—John 16:14).

At this point in this vision Jesus took the scroll from God’s *right hand*, and that was all that was necessary for heaven to break out in praise. That one act of revelation caused the living creatures and the twenty-four elders to go into full worship mode. Harps used in song and incense symbolic of prayers filled heaven with music and sweet smells.

The Song (9-14)

There are many songs in the Bible, but this one was *new*. It had good predecessors (e.g. Exodus 15; 2 Samuel 22; Psalm 145; Luke 1), but no equals. This was the song of the lamb sung by the elders and living creatures. The song celebrated the worthiness of Christ as the only candidate that could break the seals and open the scroll due to his sacrifice on Calvary’s cross.

As a result of that sacrifice salvation had been purchased and people from everywhere had been enlisted to serve the lion/lamb. They would co-reign with this king. Thousands of angels joined in the chorus. Seven qualities of this worthy one were shouted: *power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and praise*. What else can be said other than *“Amen!”* What else can be done other than *“bow down?”*

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BOWING DOWN: WORSHIP'S FORGOTTEN POSTURE

BY DAVID FAUST

Someone quipped, "I'd like to go back in time to warn myself, but I was too stubborn and wouldn't have listened anyway." At times I can be stubborn and self-willed. What about you?

My body has become less flexible over the years. As a young preacher, I sometimes asked the congregation to kneel for prayer, and I didn't understand why older members complained about kneeling. I now understand the difficulty involves more than arthritic joints or unrepentant hearts. God blesses young bodies with extra padding around the kneecaps that tends to disappear with age.

But when the Bible says, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker" (Psalm 95:6), physical posture isn't the main point. Here are the tougher questions: *Are we prideful and stubborn? Do we dare to stand before our Creator with a rebellious stare that says, "I refuse to cooperate"? Are we spiritually unbowed, untamed, and unyielding?* James 4:10 says, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

Heaven's Worship Service

Revelation chapter 5 tells about a worship service that moves us to bow humbly before God. The scene nearly exceeds the capacity of human language to describe it.

Here on earth, God's enemies ridicule prayer and some of his friends neglect it. But in heaven, prayer is so valuable that John sees "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people" (Revelation 5:8).

Here on earth, we wish more people would show up for church. But heaven's worship service is well-attended. Four living creatures (described in Revelation 4:6-9) and 24 elders (perhaps symbolizing the people of God as a whole represented by 12 tribes of Old Testament Israel and 12 apostles of the New Testament church) praise God in a worship service larger than any we have

seen. There are too many angels to count, "numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand" (v. 11). In case you're wondering, 10,000 times 10,000 equals one hundred million—and that's a really big choir!

Heaven's worship service doesn't require special lighting or an electronic sound system. "In a loud voice" that mega-sized angel-choir sings out, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (v. 12).

Twice in this chapter, John mentions that the four living creatures and 24 elders "fell down" and worshiped (vv. 8, 14). How could anyone stay on their feet in the overwhelming presence of the Lord? The sights and sounds of heaven's worship service would drive anyone to the ground in humble praise.

Time to Bend Down

Of course, there are times we shouldn't bow. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow before an idol (Daniel 3:1-30), and Jesus wouldn't bow before the devil (Matthew 4:8-10). We should never worship a mere human being or an angel of God (see Acts 10:25-26 and Revelation 22:8-9). But it's right and proper to fall down in praise before the Lamb of God who shed his blood for our salvation and rose again in power and might.

Even if our bodies stiffen with age, our hearts should bow in reverence before the holy Lord. An old proverb rightly reminds us, "The taller the stalk grows and the more grain it bears, the lower it bends."

Personal Challenge:

If it is physically possible for you to do so, bow down and kneel before the Lord as you offer him a prayer of praise.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What do you think life would be like if we had no hope of heaven? Share your thoughts with your group.

Ask two people to read aloud **Revelation 5:1-14**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions (one of which could be a paraphrase such as *The Message*). Then ask a third person to briefly summarize these verses.

2. John's vision in Revelation 4 continues seamlessly into chapter 5. As he looked closely at the one seated on the throne, he noticed a scroll in his right hand.
 - If the scroll represents a message from God, what do you think is meant by the fact that the scroll is sealed with seven seals?
3. It became clear to John that no one was able to open the scroll to see what it contained.
 - Why do you think this caused John to weep profusely (5:4)?
 - What does this say to you about the importance of God's revelation to us?
4. Then John saw it: "A Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne" (5:6).
 - Why is this being described as a "Lion" in verse 5 and a "Lamb" in verse 6?
 - How does this combination of descriptions give you confidence and peace?
5. The elder explained that the Lion/Lamb was able to open the scroll and its seals because he "has triumphed" (5:5). Together, make a list of the victories the Lion/Lamb has achieved.
6. As soon as the Lamb took the scroll from "him who sat on the throne" (5:7-8), the beings surrounding the throne fell before him in worship.
 - Have you ever fallen before the Lord in worship?
 - If not, what would compel you to do so?
7. In John's vision, all the angels in heaven and all the creatures on earth joined together in a chorus of praise "to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb" (5:13).
 - What do you think worship in heaven will be like?
 - How can you prepare now for that great, eternal event?
8. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: This week's lesson bring this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional **"1717: Your Word Is Truth"** studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.