

## *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

### **Suggestions for Leaders**

#### **Lesson One Handout**

#### **Guiding Principles of this Study**

- 1) **Always keep in mind the historical context.** As we explore how *Revelation* speaks to us today, we first will look at how the book spoke to the lives and circumstances of the original Christian churches long ago. This is an essential first step, because we must remember that when we read *Revelation*, we actually are reading someone else's mail.
- 2) **Recognize that a range of possible interpretations of *Revelation* are in play, but that it's not "anything goes."** Interpretations of *Revelation* always have been disputed in Christian history, in part because the images of *Revelation* have multiple meanings.
- 3) **Take the opportunity to look beyond the literal approach.** We will read *Revelation* with hearts of poetry, art, music, and prayer. *Revelation* is not intended to be taken literally, but is to be read at a deeper "sign" level. Images in *Revelation* are windows into a vision; they are not equations or code.
- 4) **Embrace the message of hope instead of fear.** Jesus the Lamb has already won the victory, through his death and resurrection. God already reigns. Even at its most fearful, the assurance of hope in *Revelation* is always near. This book was not written to terrify people but to wake them up, to encourage them, and to sustain their hope when things seemed the most bleak. Hope is the most important message of *Revelation*.
- 5) **Read *Revelation* in community.** This book was written to be read out loud, in public, at a church service, or with other Christians (*Rev. 1:3*). The references to "you" in *Revelation*—as in most of the New Testament—are not singular but plural, addressed to us all. We read and understand *Revelation* not alone, but in community with others.
- 6) **Explore the sense of urgency for God's realm.** While *Revelation* is about the future, most of all it teaches Christians about faithfulness in the present. It gives us eyes to see God's vision of hope—the "New Jerusalem"—breaking into our world even now. Just as Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (*Mt. 6:10*), so *Revelation* expects communities of Jesus' followers to live transformed lives now, here on earth—not just in the future or in heaven.

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**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Two Handout One**

**Performance Reviews of the Seven Churches**

(Sample answers are provided for Ephesus.)

**Ephesus**—patient and hardworking, but no longer filled with love (*Rev. 2:1–7*)

1. Warning/Praise (*2:5*)

Unless they repent, their lampstand will be removed (church will not exist).

2. Promise for conquerors (*2:7*)

Conquerors can eat from the tree of life in God's paradise.

3. What might this promise mean?

It might mean a reversal of the punishment Adam and Eve received when they ate from the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden (*Gen. 3:24*); it might be a sign of favor and life eternal.

**Smyrna**—poor in material things, but rich in spirit (*Rev. 2:8–11*)

1. Warning/Praise (*2:10a–10b*)

2. Promises for conquerors (*2:10c–11*)

3. What might these promises mean?

**Pergamum**—influenced by local culture; mostly withstanding their evils (*2:12–17*)

1. Warning/Praise (*2:16*)

2. Promise for conquerors (*2:17*)

3. What might this promise mean?

**Thyatira**—filled with faith, but too tolerant of members who mislead others (*2:18–29*)

1. Warning/Praise (*2:22–23*)

2. Promises for conquerors (*2:26–28*)

3. What might these promises mean?

**Sardis**—once faith-filled and alive, but now mostly dead (3:1–6)

1. Warning/Praise (3:3)
2. Promise for conquerors (3:5)
3. What might this promise mean?

**Philadelphia**—powerless and threatened, but faithful (3:7–13)

1. Warning/Praise (3:8)
2. Promises for conquerors (3:10, 12)
3. What might these promises mean?

**Laodicea**—rich in wealth, but lukewarm in faith (3:14–22)

1. Warning/Praise (3:16)
2. Promises for conquerors (3:20–21)
3. What might these promises mean?



**No Handouts for Lessons Three and Six**

## *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

### **Suggestions for Leaders**

#### **Lesson Four Handout One**

##### Strategies for Getting Through the Middle Chapters of *Revelation*

Several reading strategies can help us navigate the violence and horror of *Revelation*, especially in the middle chapters—*Revelation 6–19*.

**Strategy 1: Keep reading; don't get bogged down.** As you read *Revelation*, look at the full sweep of the story. Don't stop. Don't try to figure out the literal meaning of each image.

*Revelation* communicates truth by means of symbolic and pictorial language, drawing on the apocalyptic and prophetic traditions of the Hebrew scriptures. *Revelation* was written to be read aloud, with no commercials. Read steadily and all the way through. The goal is to get to the New Jerusalem vision of *Revelation 21–22*, where the promises of blessing and healing come to fulfillment.

**Strategy 2: Notice the hymns and other interludes.** Even in the worst scenes, John interrupts the violence to lift our eyes to heaven, to the throne room, where wonderful songs proclaim God's salvation. In Chapter 15, we find "those who have conquered the beast"—that is, ourselves—standing in heaven with harps of God in our hands, singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. Chapter 19 brings three more "Hallelujah" choruses. Even in the midst of judgment, *Revelation* brings us scenes of worship. The threats and plagues are tempered by singing and rejoicing, by interludes of blessing and salvation that keep hope alive. John wants us to join in the song, to sing along with the heavenly chorus, and to keep our hope alive. So keep singing as you read!

**Strategy 3: Remember, these images are warnings and wake-up calls, not literal predictions.**

The images created by the dreadful seals and plagues are not predictions of what will come; instead, they serve as frightening threats. The purpose of these terrifying descriptions of suffering is to wake up the world to God's vision for life and repentance—to wake us all up to repentance, so the threatened events will *not* come to pass. The plagues of *Revelation* function like the nightmarish visions that Ebenezer Scrooge experiences in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—they show Scrooge a terrifying “What if?”—a future that will come to pass if he does not change his life. They wake him up to the peril he faces, so that he can change before it is too late.

**Strategy 4: Notice how *Revelation* draws on the exodus story (*Revelation 15–16*).**

The exodus story can provide a helpful way to understand the plagues of the seven trumpets and seven bowls in *Revelation*. Imagine *Revelation* as a retelling of the exodus plot. Remember, in that ancient story, God heard the cry of the people suffering as slaves in Egypt (*Ex. 2:23–25*). God threatened Egypt with ten plagues designed first to show God's power and then to persuade Pharaoh to let the people go free. Similarly, in the book of *Revelation*, God hears the people's cries and threatens to send new plagues against Rome, the oppressive slaveholder (*Rev. 18:4*). This is all part of God's overall plan of liberation from injustice. God's people were experiencing a new exodus in the heart of the Roman Empire. If *Revelation* is the new exodus, then Jesus is the new Moses, leading his followers out of death and into a new land of promise—a land of life and healing. The entire book of *Revelation* is full of exodus imagery, linking our Christian journey to the Israelites' journey out of Egypt. God's people are not called to take violent action; the exodus connection underscores that. Rather, as in the exodus, salvation comes only through God's action and the blood of the Lamb. The threatened plagues seek to persuade. They are meant for the conversion of the oppressors and for the liberation of God's people. Like the

plagues brought against Pharaoh, the plagues threatened against Rome are the violence of release and liberation, not that of vengeance or cruelty.

**Strategy 5: Read the “woes” as grief and lament, not a curse.**

Many declarations of “woe” in *Revelation* can give the impression that God has sentenced the world to awful destruction. After the fourth trumpet, for example, an eagle flies through the air crying out “Woe” with a loud voice: “Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth!” (8:13; see also 12:12). These “woes” can sound like terrifying curses against the earth and its people. But “woe” is not really a helpful English translation for the Greek word *ouai*. The sense of the word, *ouai*, rather is one of lament—like a mourner wailing “oh, oh, oh” at the death of a loved one. Spanish Bibles simply translate the sound as “ay, ay, ay.” I would translate the word as “alas.” The meaning of the Greek word *ouai* is, first of all, a cry of pain, like the word *ouch* in English. It can mean “woe,” but it also expresses deep lamentation and mourning. It is as if God is crying “Ouch!” or “Alas!” on behalf of the suffering world. As we ponder the message of *Revelation*, we must remember the overarching promise that God still loves the world. God grieves and laments over the world’s pain. In the slain Lamb, Jesus, God shares our cries and comes to deliver us. God does not curse the world. God loves the world enough to weep and lament for it, and even to come to dwell in it. God will never leave the world behind!

**Strategy 6: Notice John’s use of delay (*Revelation 16*).**

The word *Armageddon* is perhaps the most famous word from *Revelation* used in popular culture today. *Armageddon* appears only once in the entire book of *Revelation* (16:16), yet it has fueled a whole industry of end-times books and movies fixated on war and destruction as God’s message. *Armageddon* probably is a reference to the ancient site of Megiddo in Israel, where a number of battles in the Hebrew scriptures were fought (*Judges 5:19, 2 Kings 23:29–30*). Some

Rapture proponents claim that God plans a bloody world war on the site of Megiddo in present-day Israel, and that this battle must happen before Jesus can return to earth. But notice that no battle is described in *Revelation 16:16*. Instead, it is delayed. This is typical of John's use of delay, to allow time for repentance, and to temper the threats of violence. The armies amass at the mountain of Megiddo. But instead of a battle, the scene shifts to the judgment of Babylon (*16:19*). Knowing that God is, in fact, not calling us to participate in a cataclysmic war gives us a great sense of hope.

**Strategy 7: Notice how John modifies references from the Hebrew scriptures (*Revelation 19–20*).**

*Revelation 19–20* alludes in various ways to the return of Christ. One scene is particularly important. Jesus returns as a warrior on a white horse, clad in a robe dipped in blood (*19:11–13*). The imagery draws from *Isaiah 63:1–3*, a battle scene. In *Isaiah*, though, the blood on the rider's garments is that of Israel's enemies. In *Revelation*, the imagery changes so that the blood on the rider's robe most likely is Jesus' own blood, shed on the cross—not the blood of his enemies. "Before the 'last battle' ever begins, his garments are already bloody with his sacrifice of himself," explains Eugene Boring.\* This important change from *Isaiah* reflects the fact that for *Revelation*, the crucifixion is the key battle, not some future battle of "Armageddon." The victory has already been won by Jesus on the cross—and is not to be fought in a final cataclysmic war.

\**Revelation, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 196.

*Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Four Handout Two**

**Seven Seals: Revelation 6:1–8:5**

<b>Seal Number/ Revelation Reference</b>	<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Likely Meaning</b>	<b>References from the Hebrew Scriptures</b>
<b>1</b> <i>Rev. 6:1–2</i>	White horse with bow and crown	Conquest	<i>Zech. 1:7–11;</i> <i>Zech. 6:1–7</i>
<b>2</b> <i>Rev. 6:3–4</i>	Red horse with sword	War	<i>Zech. 1:7–11;</i> <i>Zech. 6:1–7</i>
<b>3</b> <i>Rev. 6:5–6</i>	Black horse with balance (pair of scales)	Famine	<i>Zech. 1:7–11;</i> <i>Zech. 6:1–7</i>
<b>4</b> <i>Rev. 6:7–8</i>	Pale green horse with sword, famine, plague, wild animals	Death; Hades	<i>Zech. 1:7–11;</i> <i>Zech. 6:1–7</i>
<b>5</b> <i>Rev. 6:9–11</i>	Martyred saints, under altar, asking “how long?” with the answer, “a little longer”	Petition for God to vindicate the faithful	<i>Ps. 6:3; Ps. 13; Ps. 35:17– 28; Is. 6:11–12; Dan. 12:6–7;</i> <i>Hab. 1:2</i>
<b>6</b> <i>Rev. 6:12–17</i>	Cosmic earthquake, sun, moon, stars falling	Approach of judgment, though not the final judgment	<i>Is. 2:6–22; Is. 34:1–4; Joel 2:28–32; Am. 8:9–12; Hos. 10; Mal. 3:2–5</i>
<b>Interlude</b> <i>Rev. 7:1–8; 9– 17</i>	144,000/sealing of servants	Protection of redeemed	<i>Ezek. 9:3–6; Ex. 12:1–42</i>
<b>7</b> <i>Rev. 8:1–2</i>	Silence/transition to seven trumpets	Transition to trumpets	<i>Ex. 7:14–12:42</i>

*Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Five Handout**

***References to Followers of the Lamb***

*Circle all references in Revelation 7 to those who are followers of the Lamb.*

Revelation 7

<sup>1</sup> After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on earth or sea or against any tree. <sup>2</sup> I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea, <sup>3</sup>saying, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.” <sup>4</sup>And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel:

<sup>5</sup>From the tribe of Judah twelve thousand sealed,  
from the tribe of Reuben twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Gad twelve thousand,  
<sup>6</sup>from the tribe of Asher twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Naphtali twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Manasseh twelve thousand,  
<sup>7</sup>from the tribe of Simeon twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Levi twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Issachar twelve thousand,  
<sup>8</sup>from the tribe of Zebulun twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Joseph twelve thousand,  
from the tribe of Benjamin twelve thousand sealed.

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

<sup>11</sup>And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup>singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom  
and thanksgiving and honor  
and power and might  
be to our God forever and ever!  
Amen.”

<sup>13</sup>Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” <sup>14</sup>I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

<sup>15</sup>For this reason they are before the throne of God,  
and worship him day and night within his temple,  
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

<sup>16</sup>They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them,  
nor any scorching heat;

<sup>17</sup>for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”



**No Handouts for Lessons Three and Six**

*Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Seven Handout One**

***Revelation Pop Quiz***

1. A real problem with the book of *Revelation* is that it can be misused to promote violence.  
(Lifeline: page 55 in this study)

**True or False**

2. John identifies the first beast from the sea very clearly as the Roman Empire.  
(Lifeline: page 56)

**True or False**

3. We can be sure that the designation “666” refers to a specific world leader.  
(Lifeline: page 56)

**True or False**

4. John accuses the Roman Empire of being a pawn of Satan.  
(Lifeline: *Rev. 13:1–8*)

**True or False**

5. John’s visions are a virtual roadmap of the end of times.  
(Lifeline: Strategy 3 on page 84)

**True or False**

6. At the battle of Armageddon, legions of Christian soldiers will battle Satan and his legions, and after a long bloody struggle, the Christians will win.  
(Lifeline: pages 59–60)

**True or False**

7. The terrible plagues described, such as the destruction of one third of the world’s population when the sixth trumpet is blown, are evidence that God wills death and destruction.  
(Lifeline: page 58)

**True or False**

## *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

### Suggestions for Leaders

#### Lesson Seven Handout Two

##### Answers to *Revelation* Pop Quiz

1. A real problem with the book of *Revelation* is that it can be misused to promote violence.  
**True.**  
*Revelation* has been cited by some:
  - a) as a justification for the Crusades;
  - b) as a justification for Christians to view non-believers as the enemy;See page 55 in this study.
2. John identifies the first beast from the sea very clearly as the Roman Empire.  
**True.**  
The ten horns represent the ten kings subordinate to Rome (*Rev. 17:12*); the seven heads represent seven successive rulers (*Rev. 17:9*); the blasphemous names (*Rev. 17:3*) represent the titles that Roman rulers insisted on being called, such as “Lord,” “Savior,” and “Son of God;” Satan is referred to as a dragon nine times in *Revelation*; in *13:2b*, the beast to whom the dragon gives its power is Rome, thus making it an instrument of Satan; the first beast is described also as a political power that persecutes the saints; this designation also describes the Roman Empire (*Rev. 13:7–8*). See page 56.
3. We can be sure that the designation “666” refers to a specific world leader.  
**False.**  
There is speculation of all kinds about who or what this figure might signify. See page 56.
4. John accuses the Roman Empire of being a pawn of Satan.  
**True.**  
See Number 2, above. Also see *Revelation 13:1–8*.
5. John’s visions are a virtual roadmap of the end of times.  
**False.**  
Refer to Strategy 3 in “Strategies for Getting Through the Middle Chapters of *Revelation*,” page 84.
6. At the battle of Armageddon, legions of Christian soldiers will battle Satan and his legions, and after a long bloody struggle, the Christians will win.  
**False.**  
Refer to pages 59–60 for more information on Armageddon.
7. The terrible plagues described, such as the destruction of one third of the world’s population when the sixth trumpet is blown, are evidence that God wills death and destruction.  
**False.**  
Recall that our author states, “The purpose of the plague vision is to bring about repentance, not to inflict cruelty. God is not a cosmic destroyer” (page 58).

## *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

### **Suggestions for Leaders**

### **Lesson Eight Handout**

#### **Bye-bye, Babylon! Laments of Loss**

Invite participants to read dramatically the following scene from *Revelation 18*.

**Angel's voice:** Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling-place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury (*18:2–3*).

**Narrator:** This is Sin City, folks, home of every vice known to humanity. Rampant consumerism, materialism, hedonism, greed, violence, abuse of power—you name it, and they have it in spades. Speaking of having it, the “haves” are about to be “have-nots.” Listen to them weep and whine!

**Kings of the earth:** Alas, alas, the great city Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come (*18:10b*).

**Narrator:** It doesn't take long to lose power and wealth. Here today, gone tomorrow!

**John of Patmos:** And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives (*18:11–13*).

**Narrator:** These merchants are not weeping for *Rome*, they are weeping for *themselves*—for their loss of income and trade. Rome was the center of trade for the whole empire. Rome had made their lives rich. But, for the slaves they sold, life was cheap.

**Merchants of the earth:** Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste! (*18:16–17a*).

**John of Patmos:** And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, ‘What city was like the great city?’ And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned (*18:17b–19a*).

**Narrator:** What John is describing is a first-century economic meltdown—political power structures destroyed; trade networks disabled; buyers and sellers without goods; people out of work; other countries’ economies affected. Alas, indeed!

**Shipmasters, seafarers, and sailors:** Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste (*18:19b*).

**Angel voice:** Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues (*18:4b*).

*Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Nine Handout One**

**Seven Beatitudes from the Book of *Revelation***

- 1) ***Revelation 1:3***—Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.
  
- 2) ***Revelation 14:13a***—Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.
  
- 3) ***Revelation 16:15b***—Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.
  
- 4) ***Revelation 19:9a***—Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.
  
- 5) ***Revelation 20:6a***—Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection.
  
- 6) ***Revelation 22:7***—Blessed is the one who keep the words of the prophecy of this book.
  
- 7) ***Revelation 22:14***—Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

*Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Nine Handout Two**

**New Jerusalem—A Realtor’s Report**

Your task is to read *Revelation 21:1–22:5* as a realtor would. What you are looking for is a physical description of the New Jerusalem as if it were a piece of real estate that you were planning to put on the market. You do not need to list details such as the names of the jewels on every gate, but try to summarize details.

Write a description of this ideal piece of property in a way that “sells” it to all who have ears to hear.

*Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*

**Suggestions for Leaders**

**Lesson Nine Handout Three**

**New Jerusalem—A Doctor’s Report on the Spiritual and Physical Condition of the Saints**

Your task is to read *Revelation 21:1–22:5* as a doctor would, except you are physicians of the soul as well as the body. What you are looking for is a description of the physical and spiritual state of those who inhabit the New Jerusalem. It might be helpful for half of your group to scan the passage looking for physical characteristics, while the other half notes spiritual ones. Feel free to summarize material.

Write your doctor’s report so that all who have ears to hear will listen.

Spiritual characteristics of inhabitants

Physical characteristics of inhabitants