

2010–2011 *Horizons* Bible Study

Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today

Lesson Summaries by Louise Lawson Johnson

These summaries are pulled from each lesson of the 2010–2011 *Horizons* Bible study, *Journeys Through Revelation: Apocalyptic Hope for Today*. They provide you with a brief overview of the important aspects of each lesson. May these summaries help you as you participate and/or lead the *Revelation* study.

Introduction

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

As the journey unfolds, each successive vision reminds us that God alone is worthy of our praise and allegiance. We meet the crucified Lamb, Jesus, who leads us on a great exodus out of an unjust empire and its system of domination. We experience mythic battles and perilous plagues as God judges satanic violence and calls evildoers to repentance. Above all, the journey leads to a wondrous river of life, a healing tree of life, and ultimately to a God who lives with us in a renewed creation. The good news at the end of the *Revelation* journey is that God comes to live with us on earth. God's will is for the healing of the nations, and the healing of our wounded world. This wonderfully hope-filled vision can encourage and strengthen us in the midst of the urgent crises of today.

Lesson One: An Apocalypse, an Author, and a Witness

In *Revelation 1*, the author, John of Patmos, introduces himself and explains his purpose in writing this book. He has seen a vision of the living Christ. He has an urgent message to communicate to seven churches in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). That urgent message is a call for them to be witnesses for Christ in every aspect of their lives. In order to communicate that message, he utilizes the form of an apocalypse. In this lesson we will take a closer look at what an apocalypse is and we will meet John, the author, paying special attention to how he introduces himself and his urgent vision.

Lesson Two: Seven Letters to Seven Churches

John of Patmos addresses a series of letters to the early Christian communities of Asia Minor. The seven individual letters are like performance reviews, examining the strengths and weaknesses of each church. These seven churches faced challenges unique to each local situation. They grappled with issues such as Christians' relationship to the dominant culture, questions of wealth and poverty, and relationships with Jewish communities. John's letters to these churches are passionate and uncompromising. His goal is to persuade them not to blend in with their culture but to remain faithful witnesses to Jesus. John also seeks to give them hope.

Lesson Three: Worshiping God and the Lamb: The Heavenly Journey Begins

Worship and praise are central features of *Revelation*, and singing is one of the best ways to enter into the imagery of the book. The singing begins in Chapters 4 and 5, when John is summoned to “come up” to heaven “in the spirit,” through an open door. There he sees four living creatures and twenty-four “elders” worshiping and singing in a circle around God’s throne. The message is that we are to give allegiance only to God, not to any earthly government or power. As we will discover in this lesson, real power comes from the Lamb, whose name is Jesus.

Lesson Four: Diagnosing the Crises of Empire

Revelation unfolds like a drama. In order to reach the hope at the end of the journey, we must first experience great conflict and judgment. Seven seals are followed in quick succession by seven trumpets, each visiting calamities upon the earth. They function as an urgent wake-up call to the churches being addressed. They are not meant as predictions, but rather as prophetic judgment. These visions deliver God’s word of diagnosis about the evils of the Roman Empire, along with divine assurance that the empire’s reign of violence will soon come to an end. These visions speak to us today, helping to unveil toxic aspects of our own culture. The good news is that the witness of God’s people truly makes a difference. God hears the cries of all victims who suffer, and God answers them.

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

Like a musical interlude, the vision of *Revelation 7* interrupts the judgments of the opening of the first six seals. Only after this glimpse of white-robed martyrs from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” waving palm branches and singing before the throne of God and the Lamb is the seventh seal opened. The purpose of this interlude in Chapter 7, and others in *Revelation*, is two-fold: 1) to delay judgment so that God's people can be protected, and 2) to strengthen the people of God, encouraging the power of witness for those who follow the Lamb.

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

At the center of *Revelation*, we encounter two of the most dramatic and deeply symbolic stories, representing the life-and-death struggle that is at the heart of *Revelation*.

Revelation does not proceed chronologically; it sometimes uses flashbacks. These stories are flashbacks. Even though they come in the middle of the book, they actually are telling the story of Jesus' victory on the cross—a vital message for the isolated and powerless Christian communities of John's day—an event that has already happened, and in which Satan and are defeated. *Revelation 12* uses the symbolic picture of Satan stalking the earth, to warn Christians that things will get worse under Rome's rule before they get better.

Lesson Seven: Rapture, Violence, and Exodus

This lesson examines two related problems: how to deal with the violent legacy of *Revelation* in public culture today, and how to navigate the violence in the second half of the book. We will learn how to reframe our interpretation of the violent passages in terms of the Bible's story of exodus and liberation, not the violence of cruelty or war. There is "wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb," as the old Gospel hymn reminds us—a power we need today more than ever. It is not the power of violence. Rather, the power that we find in Jesus' blood is "Lamb Power": It is the wonder-working power of God's vulnerable, nonviolent love to change the world.

Lesson Eight: The Empire Has Fallen! Evacuate Now!

Our journey through *Revelation* culminates in a tale of two cities: Babylon (representing the Roman Empire) and the New Jerusalem (God's holy city), with a call to make a choice between them. This lesson will look at the vision in *Revelation 17–18*, where we view the judgment of the evil city, Babylon/Rome. The city is personified in a shocking way, as a whore. John wants us to be repulsed by Rome's seductively violent ways—to be shocked at the collapse of its fabulous wealth and power. Even though Rome is still very much in power when John writes *Revelation*, he seeks to convince readers that the Roman Empire is doomed. His urgent message is that we must "come out" of the imperial system of Babylon before it is too late, so that we can participate as citizens in God's New Jerusalem, the city of blessing and promise.

Lesson Nine: Journey into the New Jerusalem

Our journey through *Revelation* comes to completion in the vision-tour of the second city, the city of blessing, God's New Jerusalem. John shows us each detail of the new city so we can taste and see and experience the landscape of God's renewed world. This vision is the very opposite of Armageddon. The New Jerusalem is an earth-centered image of beauty and healing. In this lesson, we will come to the awesome recognition that God is coming to us. This vision fulfills the people's longings for safety and peace with God. It invites us to see ourselves as citizens already of this wondrous city, and to live our lives in terms of this powerful vision of hope. This is a vision that transforms the way we live our lives each day. As our journey comes to an end, we now come to see our own cities in light of God's wondrous vision of healing.