

THE REVELATION

TO
JOHN



STRENGTH
FOR THE
STRUGGLE

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

by H. Michael Brewer

Revelation

Strength for the Struggle

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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Like John of the Apocalypse, Mike once saw a vision on the Lord's Day. Her name is Janet, and he married her, had two daughters, and lived happily ever after.

Revelation

CONTENTS

Introduction to the Men's Bible Study	3
Introduction to the Revelation of John	5
session one <i>Strength in Jesus Christ</i>	8
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>The Highest Power</i>	
session two <i>Strength in Commitment</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Faithfulness to the End</i>	
session three <i>Strength in New Beginnings</i>	15
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>The Open Door</i>	
session four <i>Strength in Worship</i>	19
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>The Power of Praise</i>	
session five <i>Strength in the Church</i>	22
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Wings in the Wilderness</i>	
session six <i>Strength in the Promise of Victory</i>	26
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>The Fat Lady Is Already Singing</i>	
session seven <i>Strength in the Hope of Heaven</i>	29
<i>Introduction</i>	
* <i>Down by the Riverside</i>	
the writer <i>Biography</i>	Inside Front Cover

Introduction

Men's **BIBLE** Study

The Reason for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life ...
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from "A Brief Statement of Faith," adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God's Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God's Word" (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men's breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. **We will treat no question as stupid.** Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. **We will stick to the Scripture in this study.** The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3. **We will regard the leader(s) as "first among equals."** Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. **We will remember that we are here to hear God speak.** Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the Biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. **We will listen for "the question behind the question."** Sometimes a man's gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. **We will agree to disagree in love.** Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. **We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study.** Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the "right" answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of these seven "rules."

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session

is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas which come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) what does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study there are Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each session to suggest where a study might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

Revelation

INTRODUCTION

Sooner or later some psychologist is bound to diagnose a condition known as "apocalyptophobia," a terrible fear of reading or studying The Revelation to John. Surely there is no more intimidating book in the Bible than Revelation. Readers seem to either shy away from this strange volume altogether or get drawn into elaborate and obsessive interpretations aimed at deciphering the events of the future.

We will try to steer a middle course in these sessions. Admittedly, many passages in Revelation are puzzling, but the book as a whole is certainly accessible to any careful Christian reader. Even if some of the details elude us, we can get a clear sense of the bold brushstrokes and major themes of John's visionary writing. We will try to clarify some of the important symbols that John uses, but we will avoid intricate interpretations that attempt to assign a secret meaning to every number and multiheaded beast.

While our goal is to read Revelation as a book addressed to contemporary Christians, we must begin by asking two questions of historical significance: What was the context in which this book was written? And what style of literature is represented in Revelation? We'll take these questions in turn.

Who? When? Where? Why?

According to the book itself, Revelation was written by someone named John who was in exile for his faith on the island of Patmos (in the Aegean Sea off the coast of western Asia Minor). Is this the same John who wrote the Fourth Gospel? Scholars are dubious for a number of reasons. The vocabulary and style of Revelation are strikingly different from The Gospel of John. The writer of Revelation holds the apostles in such high regard that he hardly seems to belong to their number himself. Also, the ancient church was slow to accept Revelation into the New Testament canon, an unlikely reluctance if the apostle John were the undisputed author. Fortunately, the authority of Revelation does not rely on its author's identity, but on the Holy Spirit who speaks through the book in the voice of the risen Christ.

Even if the writer remains an enigma, we can speak with considerably more certainty about the setting and purpose of the book. Revelation was written during a time of Christian persecution, probably during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who ruled the empire from A.D. 90-96.

Earlier Roman emperors had flirted to varying degrees with claims of personal divinity, but Domitian attempted to enforce emperor worship throughout the Roman Empire. In official proclamations Domitian referred to himself as "lord and god." Shrines to the emperor were raised in many cities, including some of the very cities containing congregations that are addressed in Revelation. Using a far-reaching network of informers, Domitian ruthlessly persecuted those who refused to participate in emperor worship. His methods of punishment were cruel in the extreme, causing rumors that perhaps the infamous Nero had returned from the grave.

Naturally, Christians were a primary target of this persecution. We assume that John, the author of Revelation, was one of the Christians arrested during this time. Even in exile, John was concerned about the well-being and faithfulness of the congregations under his care. For instance, the second and third chapters of Revelation contain messages written specifically to warn and encourage seven congregations in Asia Minor. The book as a whole is intended as a source of strength and comfort to the persecuted church throughout the world. Revelation still bolsters the spirit and fortifies the resolve of the Christian who reads it receptively.

What? What? What?

In order to understand any piece of writing, the reader must know what kind of literature is represented. For instance, a sophisticated reader of newspapers will interpret articles differently, depending upon whether they appear on the front page, the editorial page, or in the advertising supplement. Experience teaches us that movie reviews must be read in a different light than obituaries!

The same is true of the literary types found in the Bible. Many people confuse Revelation with prophecy, which leads to circuitous (and often silly!) efforts to make the symbols of John's visions conform to tomorrow's headlines.

In fact, Revelation is a classic example of apocalyptic literature, a form of writing that emerged in Judaism in the third century B.C. and continued to flourish in the early Christian community. Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New Testament are the best examples of this kind of writing in the Bible, but scholars know of many similar ancient books outside the Bible.

William Ramsay, in his book *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, lists the following characteristics of apocalyptic literature:

- It professed to be giving secret information about the coming future.
- It was in a style full of symbols that only insiders might understand.
- It viewed this world from the perspective of heaven, as though the author were watching events on earth from the point of view of some heavenly being.
- It divided history into periods.
- It predicted the blackest troubles as coming in the period just before the climax of the story.
- At the climax, there would be a cosmic battle between the forces of evil and the forces of good, with God's legions triumphing.
- It envisioned a great judgment day, the vindication of the righteous, and the conquest of evil.
- It hinted or flatly stated that all these cataclysmic events would happen very soon.
- Often the apocalypse included the promise of the messiah.'

Apocalyptic literature is not really concerned with the distant future, but with the suffering and hardship of the

contemporary moment. Since literature of this kind is typically written for oppressed people, the message is couched in a "code" of visions, symbolic creatures, and significant numbers in order to avoid censorship by the authorities. As we study Revelation together, we will attempt to discern how John's bizarre visions may speak to our needs today.

From Alpha to Omega

Revelation defies a simple linear outline. In general the book seems to be organized around a series of sevens: seven letters to seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpet blasts, seven bowls of trouble. The outline below, from *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, offers one way to frame the contents of Revelation.'

In our seven sessions we will skip around somewhat, focusing on major themes in Revelation, particularly as they offer Christians encouragement for living in the contemporary world. Week by week we will encounter wellsprings of strength in Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:1–20), in commitment (Rev. 2:18–29 and 7:9–13), in new beginnings (Rev. 3:1–13), in worship (Rev. 4:1–11 and 5:6–14), in the church (Rev. 2:12–17 and 12:1–17), in the promise of victory over evil (Rev. 19:11–21 and 20:1–3, 7–10), and in the hope of heaven (Rev. 21:1–22:7).

Revelation						
The	Apocalypse: A	Vision of	Catastrophic	and the Final	Victory of Christ	
	"Come	up here, and I will	show you what must	take place after this"	(4:1).	
1:1	4:1	6:1	8:1	11:1	15:1	21:1 22:21
Opening Vision Of Christ and Letters to Seven Churches	A Vision of Heaven	The Seven Seals of the Scrolls of Destiny	The Seven Trumpets Sounded by Angels	Christians Are Persecuted All Over the Earth	Seven Bowls of Trouble Are Poured on Earth	The End: The New Heaven and the New Earth
Introduction, 1:1—8 A vision of the exalted Christ, 1:9—20 Letters to seven churches about their particular needs, 2—3	The scene around God's throne, 4 The scroll of destiny being opened by the Lamb (Christ), 5	Six seals of troubles opened, 6 But God's people are protected, 7	Six plagues fall on earth, 8—9 But a scroll of yet further prophecy is given, 10	A "beast" battles God's witnesses, 11 A "dragon" pursues a "mother" (God's people) 12 "Beasts" of political and religious power war on God's people, 13 But the "saints" are saved, 14	Seven catastrophes, climaxed by the fall of "Babylon," 15—16 The destruction of "Babylon" (Rome), 17—18 The conquering Christ revealed, 19 The millenium and final victory over Satan accomplished, 20	John's final vision of a transformed, perfected cosmos, 21:1—22:5 Closing blessings and words of assurance, 22:6—21

Author: "John" (traditionally the apostle, but this is not stated)

Recipients: Seven churches in what is now Turkey

Date: A.D. 96

Occasion: Widespread persecution of Christians by Rome

Purpose: To inspire Christians to endure to the end through a vision of Christ's final victory

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 507.

2. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*, p. 505.

Bringing Our Baggage

All Scripture is personal in nature, because through the Bible, God speaks directly to the community of faith. The Bible will bring God's Word to us only if we genuinely bring ourselves to the Bible.

As we read about struggle and victory in the pages of Revelation, we will benefit from bringing our own struggles and hardships to the text.

In what aspects of your life do you feel oppressed?

In what areas do you hunger for strength?

What "enemies" attack you where you live?

An honest and open examination of your life will make room within you for Revelation to speak. Don't try to leave your baggage behind when you arrive for the first session. Bring it along! In the company of other Christians, listen to your life and listen to God's Word. Perhaps you will be surprised to discover the strength that God is eager to give you!

All Aboard!

We will have the opportunity to learn a great deal about Revelation in our weeks together. We will be venturing into seldom-explored territory, and by the end of our journey we will have new insights and understanding. But remember we are passing through Revelation like tourists, examining many of the high points, but leaving vast tracts unvisited.

If these sessions leave the reader hungry for more, there are excellent commentaries available that go into much greater depth than this brief workbook can plumb. The Christian who returns frequently to Revelation over the years will find in John a stimulating and reassuring friend whose visions continually lead us into fresh paths of hope and courage.

Revelation is not a book to fear. Here is a book of comfort and consolation. Here is a book of hope and confidence. May the Lamb unseal the treasures of this book for us. Let those who have ears listen to what the Spirit is saying!

Some Additional Helps

The only materials necessary for leading this study are Bibles for all group members and this study guide. However, Revelation is likely to raise many questions as individual passages are studied. If you wish to have additional resources available, you may look for any of the following at your local library.

These commentaries give good verse-by-verse information:

William Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

Richard L. Jeske, *Revelation for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

J.P.M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979).

Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991).

These creative readings of Revelation do not cover every verse, but offer wonderful insights to major themes in the book:

Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987).

Marva Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994).

Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

Also helpful for a quick overview is:

William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

one

Strength in JESUS CHRIST

Revelation 1:1—20

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Is Revelation a book for the future or a book for today? Many people insist that John's Revelation is a detailed blueprint for foretelling tomorrow's headlines. You've undoubtedly heard or read such interpretations. This beast represents Russia, and that one the European Common Market, and that one the pope, and so on. Three problems emerge with such interpretations.

First, no one seems to agree about the correct interpretation, so the predictions that emerge from Revelation differ from writer to writer. Who do we believe? Who is right?

The second problem is this. If Revelation is simply a book of predictions about coming events that will unfold generations or centuries in the future, what is its relevance for you and me? Most of us have enough trouble just getting through today without worrying about the international scene in 2097!

The third problem is that treating Revelation as prophecy ignores the best research of Bible scholars and historians. Books like Revelation and Daniel represent a particular kind of literature called "apocalyptic." (That's why John's book is called The Apocalypse in some Bibles.) Apocalyptic books were not written to predict the future, but to give comfort and hope to people under persecution. Such books were probably written in a "secret code" of bizarre visions and special numbers so that the reigning authorities wouldn't understand their meaning.

And what is the meaning of Revelation? **HANG IN THERE! HOLD THE FORT! DON'T GIVE UP! GOD WILL GET YOU THROUGH THIS!** Isn't that a message that speaks to you and me as we wrestle with the problems of this day? John was writing for persecuted Christians near the end of the first century, but his vision of God's triumphant power is as timely today as on the day it was first penned.

Revelation is not an intricate timeline of coming events, but John has this much to say about the future: God will win, and hell will lose. This is our comfort and our strength. Whatever rough spots may lie before us, in the end God's will cannot be thwarted. The future—of the universe, of humanity, of you and me—is in good hands!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read silently Revelation 1:1—3, 9—11. These verses serve as an introduction to John's book.

Jot down words or phrases that suggest this book is intended to foretell the future.

Jot down words or phrases that suggest this book is meant to give comfort to Christians under fire.

What is the circumstance of John as he writes this book?

In Revelation 1:11, John is commanded to write a particular message to each of seven churches. These messages are recorded in chapters 2 and 3. Read any one of them.

Does the message sound more like a prediction of the future or a message of encouragement? Explain why you think so.

In his opening, John refers to his work as "prophecy" that will show "what must soon take place." In the light of our discussion, do you read that literally or do you think those words are part of the "code" in which Revelation is written? Explain your point of view.

Can you think of any subcultures within our country that speak in "code"? Why do you believe groups sometimes adopt "in jokes" and slang? Does this help you understand why Revelation is written in code?

The Highest Power

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The Revelation to John will lead us into strange places and dazzle us with frightening visions, but the book begins with One who is neither strange to us nor frightening. After a brief introduction, in verses 4—5 John immediately turns his focus to the triune God: the eternal Father, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ. The presence and protective power of God will be our anchor as we venture into Revelation, the reliable compass by which we will find our way through unexplored territory.

Revelation is a book about clashing powers: earthly powers, demonic powers, and divine power. Our own lives bear witness that a continuing struggle is going on all around us. We are shocked by what we read in the papers about the warfare in our streets, in our families, and in our world. We ourselves struggle with personal problems at work, difficulties in our relationships, illness and aging, economic setbacks, uncertainty about the future. We even struggle within ourselves to make right choices, to live good lives, to grow into mature Christians.

All too often we have the feeling that the wrong side is winning the struggle. We can be tempted to despair when we look at our world and our own lives. But John leaves no doubt that God is the power above every other power. There is no real contest here. This is why Revelation uses the words "Almighty" and "throne" more than any other New Testament book. In fact, John uses "throne" nearly forty times, underlining the sovereignty of God. Evil may have its way for a brief time, but God is enthroned over the whole universe. The powers of hell may seem mighty at the moment, but God alone is the Almighty.

This power of God is not distant and beyond our reach; this power is revealed in Jesus Christ! The same Jesus we know so well, and who knows us so well, is at one with the Power that made all things, and that is guiding the universe toward its final destiny. The same hands that once shaped wood in a carpentry shop are now shaping your life and mine. The same hands that once plucked Simon Peter from the deadly waves of the sea are lifting up you and me. The same hands that felt the agony of the nails on the cross are reaching out to help us with our pain and grief.

When we can't seem to muster the strength to face our daily challenges and we're ready to throw in the towel, Revelation reminds us that Christ reigns and his power is sufficient for every need, whether personal or global. Indeed, Christ has already won the battle against the forces that seek to deform and destroy us. The devil is already defeated; he just doesn't know it yet!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Revelations 1:4—20. In verses 4—5, what words or phrases suggest the great power of the Three-in-One God?

The number seven in Revelation stands for fullness or completeness. For instance, in chapter 5 Jesus is pictured as a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes in order to show the fullness of his power and knowledge. Why do you think John speaks of the Holy Spirit as "seven spirits"?

In John's vision of Christ (1:12-16), we see an unearthly picture of the risen Lord. What is striking or troubling to you in this vision? What is confusing? What is comforting?

How is the power and authority of Jesus displayed in the details of Jesus' appearance?

The vision of Christ is so awesome as to be almost frightening. John himself collapses in a swoon! How does Jesus respond to John's fear?

Concluding the Session

Ask participants to think of general areas of life in which Christians might feel a need for the power of God in Jesus Christ. List the suggestions on a piece of newsprint.

Without betraying confidences or indulging in gossip, can the group name particular people who have needs in these areas?

Anyone who feels comfortable doing so may share an issue in his own life where he is seeking help from Christ.

As we study Revelation, we will discover a wealth of hymns in this book. Before ending today's session you might sing together a hymn that affirms the power of God and/or the lordship of Christ, such as, "Rejoice, the Lord Is King," "He Is King of Kings," "Crown Him with Many Crowns," "All Hail the Power," or "You, Living Christ, Our Eyes Behold" (inspired by Rev. 1:13-15).

You may conclude by praying in any fashion that is appropriate for your gathering, perhaps allowing opportunity to pray for particular people and problems. If you wish, you may invite your group to read the following prayer in unison.

"King of kings and Lord of lords, you hold the whole world in your hands, and there is nothing too hard for you. Give us your blessing as we study the words of this book together. Give us your powerful help in life's hard places. Give us your grace and peace as we go our separate ways. Amen!"

Afterword

Most of us have heard the story of the man who fell over a cliff and managed to grab hold of a jutting root. Dangling two hundred feet above jagged rocks, the man began to yell. "I need help," he cried. "Is anybody up there?"

From overhead the desperate man heard a voice say, "This is God. Don't be afraid. I will save you. All you have to do is let go of the root."

The man looked at the root. He glanced down at the rocks far below. Clinging tightly to the root, he yelled, "No offense, God, but is there anybody else up there?"

If we find ourselves in apparently hopeless situations, is it because God lacks the power to help us, or do we lack the faith to trust God's power?

Norman Harrison in *His in a Life of Prayer* tells how Charles Inglis, while making the voyage to America a number of years ago, learned from the devout and godly captain of an experience which he had had but recently with George Muller of Bristol. It seems that they had encountered a very dense fog. Because of it the captain had remained on the bridge continuously for twenty-four hours, when Mr. Muller came to him and said, "Captain, I have come to tell you that I must be in Quebec on Saturday afternoon." When informed that it was impossible, he replied: "Very well. If the ship cannot take me, God will find some other way. I have never broken an engagement for fifty-seven years. Let us go down into the chart-room and pray.

The captain continues the story thus: "I looked at that man of God and thought to myself, What lunatic asylum could that man have come from. I never heard such a thing as this. Mr. Muller,' I said, 'do you know how dense this fog is?' 'No,' he replied, 'my eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.' He knelt down and prayed one of those simple prayers, and when he had finished I was going to pray; but he put his hand on my shoulder and told me not to pray. 'Firstly,' he said, 'because you do not believe God will, and secondly, I believe God has, and there is no need whatever for you to pray about it.' I looked at him, and George Muller said, 'Captain, I have known my Lord for fifty-seven years, and there has never been a single day that I have failed to get an audience with the King. Get up and open the door, and you will find that the fog has gone.' I got up and the fog was indeed gone. George Muller was in Quebec Saturday afternoon for his engagement."

The story is told of a sailor who was thrown into a stormy sea in a shipwreck. The sailor managed to reach a rock jutting above the waves. He wrapped his arms around the rock and held on for dear life until the storm passed and the tide went out, when he was able to swim safely to shore. Someone later asked him if he had been afraid as he clung to the rock. "Of course I was afraid," he admitted. "I was shaking like a leaf. Luckily for me, the rock didn't shake at all!"

Looking Ahead

For next week, try to read Revelation 2:18-29 and 7:9-13. Our theme will be long-term commitment. Consider the major commitments you have undertaken in your life. In what way have those commitments strengthened you and defined your character? How have the commitments of others affected you? What would it be like to live a life without commitments?

1. Glenn Clark, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, by Reuben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), page 293.

two

Strength in Commitment

Revelation 1:1—20

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

- Some authorities estimate that approximately 69 divorces will take place for every 100 weddings that are performed in the United States this year.
- Countless divorced fathers are dodging court-ordered child-support payments.
- Authorities report that large public gatherings such as world fairs have become occasions for abandoning unwanted young children or senile parents or grandparents who cannot identify themselves.
- Companies lay off thirty-year employees without compunction in downsizing operations.
- Sociologists and pollsters tell us that loyalty to institutions, political parties, and denominations is at an all-time low in North America.

A precious quality is disappearing from the modern spirit. Call it perseverance or persistence or stick-to-it-iveness. Call it loyalty or steadfastness. Whatever we choose to name it, the personal character of many men today is weakened and diminished by an unwillingness to make and stand by long-term commitments. The motto of my high school was, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." The motto for our times seems to be, "When the going gets tough, call it quits."

Perhaps you recall the old adage: "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character." A man's character is the sum total of his values and his deeds. Character grows from the determination to stay the course in spite of hardships and sacrificial demands. Without a firm commitment to ideals, beliefs, and personal standards, we are sentenced to drift through life along the paths of least resistance, going nowhere in particular, accomplishing nothing of importance, and becoming nobody of substance.

Several times in Revelation, the readers are encouraged to patient endurance. The Greek word translated as "endurance" is *hupomone*. This Greek word means literally to "remain below," that is, to continue to bear up even under heavy burdens. This is not resignation or surrender, but the strength to "keep on keeping on" through the certainty that Christ is beside us in our struggles.

Revelation does not suggest that the followers of Jesus will be preserved *from* every trial, but that Christ will preserve us *through* every trial. Those who remain faithful have the promise that Christ will bring us through to the other side of tribulation!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read Revelation 2:18-29. This is one of the messages to the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 1:11, this one addressed to the congregation at Thyatira.

For what qualities does Christ praise the Thyatiran congregation? Do you see any relationship between these qualities?

For what failings does Christ criticize this congregation?

Apparently, some of the faithful in Thyatira have rejected new teachings that would have led them into trouble. Can you think of trends or new ideas that Christians in our own day ought to reject?

How can we tell which new ideas might build up our faith and which might be harmful?

Write down every word or phrase in this passage that suggests the idea of commitment and perseverance.

What lasting commandment does Christ leave with the Christians of Thyatira?

The first readers of Revelation were tempted to give up their Christian faith under persecution or to revert to the easier pagan morality practiced by their neighbors. In what ways are contemporary Christians subjected to these temptations? What other factors of modern life make it hard to keep our commitments?

List some of the areas in your life in which you have honored long-term commitments. Has it been worthwhile? What benefits have you found from perseverance and faithfulness?

Sometimes God calls us to make changes in our life, and at other times God urges us to faithful endurance. How can we tell the difference between those circumstances?

Faithfulness to the End

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The original readers of Revelation faced the possibility that they might literally be asked to lay down their lives for their Christian commitment. In a sober warning to his followers in Matthew 24:9-13, Jesus said, "Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and . . . the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

God willing, you and I will never face such dire circumstances, but nevertheless God expects us to remain committed to the very end of our lives. Christian discipleship requires lifelong endurance, discarding the misplaced loyalties that compete with Christ and running the race all the way across the finish line. (See Hebrews 12:1-2.)

Is such perseverance possible? Can anyone be saved? By God's grace, yes! God's faithfulness remains certain even when ours falters. John sees the vision of a numberless multitude of those who have endured to the end and come out on the other side of life's struggles. Study this vision carefully, and find your face in that faithful throng!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read Revelation 7:9-14.

How would you describe the mood of this passage? What words and phrases support your description?

What does it mean that the worshipers have "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb"?

Have the worshipers in the multitude accomplished their own salvation through their faithfulness, or is their salvation a gift from God? Explain your thinking.

Can you think of persons who have modeled faithful commitment by their style of living? These might be characters from the Bible, historical figures, or people who have influenced your life. What names come to mind? Compile these answers on newsprint and invite participants to explain their choices?

Concluding the Session

If you wish to sing a hymn, the themes of commitment and perseverance are prominent in "Rise Up, O Men of God," "Fight the Good Fight," "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," and "I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me."

Ask each man to silently consider one area of his life that is in need of greater commitment on his part. Allow time for those who are comfortable to share their thoughts with the group, but do not pressure anyone to do so.

After a time of silent prayer, you may close the meeting with a prayer of your own, or you may read the following prayer.

"God of the long haul, when life gets tough, help us to hang tough. We ask for your help with our commitments. We don't want to be blown back and forth like a feather in the wind. Help us to root ourselves in you, to hold our ground, and to grow in our Christian discipleship every day. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

Afterword

Everyone is in a hurry. The persons whom I lead in worship, among whom I counsel, visit, pray, preach, and teach, want short cuts. They want me to help them fill out the form that will get them instant credit (in eternity). They are impatient for results. They have adopted the lifestyle of a tourist and only want the high points. . . . The Christian life cannot mature under such conditions and in such ways.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who saw this area of spiritual truth, at least, with great clarity wrote, "The essential thing in heaven and earth is . . . that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living." It is this "long obedience in the same direction" which the mood of the world does so much to discourage.'

In Aesop's story of the tortoise and the hare, the slowpoke tortoise defeats the speedy hare through his constant, faithful plodding. God does not require of us greater speed or strength than we can muster, but God does expect us to keep putting one foot in front of the other until the race is finished. As long as we refuse to quit the race, we can safely leave the outcome in God's hands.

It's easy to fight when everything's right,
And you're mad with the thrill and the glory;
It's easy to cheer when victory's near,
And wallow in fields that are gory.
It's a different song when everything's wrong,
When you're feeling infernally mortal;
When it's ten against one, and hope there is none,
Buck up, little soldier, and chortle:

Carry on! Carry on!
There isn't much punch in your blow.
You're glaring and staring and hitting out blind;
You're muddy and bloody, but never you mind.
Carry on! Carry on!
You haven't the ghost of a show.
It's looking like death, but while you've a breath
Carry on, my son! Carry on!

1. Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), pp. 12-13.

2. Robert Service, "Carry On!" as quoted in *The Book of Virtues*, by William J. Bennett (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 541.

In spite of intense pressure to participate, Eric Liddell refused to run on Sunday in a track event at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. A staunch Scottish sabbath-keeper, Liddell felt that athletic competition on the Lord's Day was a sin.

In 1965, Dodgers pitcher Sandy Koufax refused to pitch in the opening game of the World Series when it fell on the Jewish Day of Atonement. He felt it was inappropriate to play a children's game on the holiest day of his religion. The owners of the Dodgers were not happy with Koufax, but he stood his ground, and Don Drysdale was brought in to pitch. The Dodgers lost that game, but won the Series.

Eli Herring, a 6-foot-7-inch offensive tackle for Brigham Young University, was the third-ranked senior tackle in the country. When the Raiders offered Herring a big-figure place on their NFL team, the young Mormon respectfully declined the offer. He felt it would be a violation of his faith to work on Sundays, when most football games are scheduled. So Herring turned down a life of wealth and fame in order to stand up for his principles. He now plans to become a math teacher.

Completely aside from your views on the sabbath, when was the last time you took a costly stand for what you believe? What do you believe in so strongly that you would accept ridicule and loss rather than compromise your commitment?

Looking Ahead

Next time we will study the letters to Sardis and Philadelphia in Revelation 3:1-13. In those letters Christ promises new life and open doors to struggling Christians. If you have the opportunity, you may find it helpful to review your own life and look at the areas where you need renewal and fresh possibilities.

three

Strength in NEW BEGINNINGS

Revelation 3:1—13

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

In the last session, we looked at the importance of holding fast to the calling of Christ and the practice of "long obedience in the same direction." Today's readings will lead us to consider new beginnings and change of directions. At first glance these ideas may seem contradictory, but a healthy discipleship requires both steadfast commitment and openness to fresh guidance from the Spirit. Let us return to the metaphor of running a race. A friend of mine, a slow but steady runner, had fallen behind in a race that wound through a residential area. Because the frontrunners were out of sight, my friend and his running companions missed a turn on the course and inadvertently ran several blocks in the wrong direction. As soon as he realized his mistake, my friend turned back and finished the race on the proper course.

Revelation challenges us to run the race to the finish line, all the while remaining willing to change direction if we should discover we have made a wrong turn.

"Repentance" is one name for this kind of change. The New Testament idea of repentance means a turning toward God and a change of mind. Since we are confident of God's loving-kindness, we might also describe this process as a new beginning. In fact, God is always setting open doors before us for our blessing, growth, and happiness, if only we will pass through those doors.

Consider the letter to the church in Sardis in Revelation 3:1—6. Christ has some critical things to say to this congregation, but Christ does not criticize us just for the sake of slamming us. Far from it! Christ opens our eyes to our mistakes so we can make a fresh beginning in his grace.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Revelation 3:1—6 aloud to the group from a contemporary translation like Today's English Version or Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. Ask the participants to follow along in their own Bible as the contemporary version is read. Before moving into the discussion questions allow a few minutes for comparing the translations.

What differences emerged? How did meanings vary? Were some phrases striking or enlightening?

What charge does Christ bring against the congregation at Sardis?

The city of Sardis was well known for its manufacture of cotton fabric and clothing. How does this letter make ironic reference to the city's textile industry?

Have you ever experienced a congregation that appeared to be alive but was dead in some ways? Briefly describe that situation.

In this passage, repentance is compared to waking up and/or bringing back to life. Can you think of other ways to talk about repentance or new beginnings?

In Revelation 3:1, Christ is described as the one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. The seven spirits represent the Holy Spirit, and the stars represent the churches themselves. Why would Christ be described in this way in this letter? Do you see any signs of hope in this description?

The Greek word for "behold" occurs three times in verses 8—9. Do you think Christ sometimes has trouble getting our attention? If that is a problem, what might be done?

It has been said that Christ cannot open doors in our lives, if our lives are not open to Christ. What does this mean to you? Do you agree? Why?

In the light of this letter, why do you suppose Jesus is described as the one who has the key of David?

Take a list of the areas in which many men confront dead ends or shut doors. Compile these on newsprint for the group to review.

Can you recall times in your life when you have experienced closed doors? What did you do about it?

Are there currently areas in your life or faith in which you long for an open door? What promise does this passage hold out for you?

The Open Door

We turn now to the message sent to the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7—13. Christ does not criticize this church. Rather he praises them for holding on to their faith even though they are small and weak compared to their persecutors.

Perhaps the "synagogue of Satan" represents the Judaizers who argued that Christians must keep all the Old Testament laws. The Judaizers tried to take away the freedom of faith in Christ. They wanted to close the door on grace.

But Christ has set an open door before these weak and struggling Christians at Philadelphia, a door of limitless possibilities, a door that no power on earth can close! When we set out to turn our lives around, we usually try to rely on our own strength. Maybe this is why so many new resolutions and fresh starts fall by the wayside in a short while and we end up at the point from which we started.

Genuine new beginnings and fresh starts must be built on the strength of Christ. The risen Lord promises an open door to the Philadelphians, and the promise clearly does not depend on their own strength. Recognizing their own weakness, the Philadelphian Christians have held fast to Christ, and Christ has promised them an open door.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Revelation 3:7—13 aloud in the same manner you read the earlier passage, and allow time for comparisons.

Do you believe Christ can really open doors for us, or are we on our own? Explain your thoughts.

The victory promises in this passage offer an exhilarating glimpse of what it means to walk through the open door of Christ. A pillar is a means of strength and support in building. What does it mean that you might become a pillar in the temple of God?

In the Bible, to receive someone's name means either to share in the character of the one whose name is given, or it signifies that we belong to the one whose name we bear. Write down the three names that Christ promises to the victorious Christian. What does each name suggest to you?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Concluding the Session

Appropriate songs for today might include "Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore," "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door," "Song of Hope," "Take the Name of Jesus with You," and "Take My Life."

Following your discussion (and singing, if you wish) you may write a prayer together for your dismissal. Ask for suggestions to fill in the blanks below, and then read the prayer responsively. You may add more petitions, if needed. Some possible fill-ins might be: problems at home, troubles at work, personal decisions, financial hardship, health problems, forgiving our enemies, growing old, bad habits and addictions, etc.

ONE: God of all hope and giver of new life, as we struggle with _____

ALL: Open the door for us.

ONE: As we struggle with _____

ALL: Open the door for us.

ONE: As we struggle with _____

ALL: Open the door for us.

ONE: As we struggle with _____

ALL: Open the door for us.

ONE: As we struggle with _____

ALL: Open the door for us.

ONE: We ask for this help in the name of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one can shut!

ALL: Amen!

Afterword

To repent is to come to your senses. It is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, "I'm sorry," than to the future and saying "Wow!"

The Swedish chemist Alfred Nobel was surprised one day to read his own epitaph in the morning newspaper. Alfred's older brother had died, and a confused reporter had accidentally written an obituary for Alfred. The obituary remembered Nobel as the inventor of dynamite, praised his contribution to modern warfare, and mentioned his considerable wealth. The chemist studied the obituary and was depressed by what he saw there. Surely his life should amount to more than explosives and money!

Nobel decided to rewrite his epitaph. He would make a change in the direction of his life. So the chemist instituted the Nobel Prize, which honors and encourages contributions to peace through science and literature. Today, Nobel is better remembered for his support of peace than for his invention of dynamite. As long as we are living, life has possibilities and open doors.

A young Armenian girl named Elizabeth Caraman saw the Turkish troops take her father away for execution for no apparent reason. Elizabeth's father resisted, so his captors wrapped him up in an old piece of carpet, threw him on the back of a donkey, and took him away. That was the last time Elizabeth saw her father alive.

Elizabeth might have become bitter and cynical, but her Christian faith sustained her, and Elizabeth grew up to become a caring person. A few years later Elizabeth was serving in an American mission hospital. One day while changing the bandages of a Turkish soldier, Elizabeth was rambling on to distract the man from his pain. For some reason she told about how her father had died.

The man listened intently. Finally, in a low voice he said, "I am the man who killed your father. I rolled him off the donkey, still wrapped in the carpet, and ran him through with my bayonet. I still see it in my mind, and the memory sickens me."

Elizabeth said nothing, but went on bandaging his wound. Some people would say that what happened next was not humanly possible. When Elizabeth finally spoke, she said, "Jesus told us to forgive our enemies. So, I forgive you."

Day after day, she returned to the soldier's bedside and carefully cleaned the wounds of the man who had murdered her father. And one morning, just before

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 79.

Elizabeth was transferred to serve at an orphanage, the Turk looked at her and exclaimed, "Your Jesus must be even greater than Mohammed, if he can live in you like this!"

The door of healing swings on the hinges of grace, and only Jesus Christ can open that door for us.²

Two friends were watching a western movie on television. As the hero rode on horseback toward a cliff, one man said, "I'll bet you ten bucks he goes over the cliff." The second man said, "I'll take that bet." A few minutes later the cowboy did indeed plunge over the cliff. The loser handed over his ten dollars with a sigh, but the first man said, "I don't really feel right about taking your money. I've seen this movie before." The second man shrugged and said, "That's all right. I've seen it before, too, but I didn't think that cowboy would be stupid enough to make the same mistake again."

Are we in the habit of making the same mistakes again and again?

Looking Ahead

Next week we will look at worship and praise as depicted in Revelation. In preparation you may wish to read chapters 4-5. Or you may prefer to browse through John's visions, enjoying the various songs that punctuate the book. Gathering copies of a recent worship bulletin from your service may help the group match contemporary acts of worship with the worship that John pictures.

2. Adapted from *Courage in Both Hands*, by Allan A. Hunter (New York: Ballantine, 1962).

four

Strength in WORSHIP

Revelation 4:1—11; 5:6--14

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

A father had taken his young son to worship on Sunday, and on entering the church building the boy noticed a plaque in the hallway in honor of veterans.

"Dad," the boy inquired, "whose names are those?"

The father explained, "Those are people who died in the service."

"Oh," said the boy solemnly. "Did they die in the 8:30 service or the 11:00 service?"

Some of us can identify with the boy's sentiments. Many men are more comfortable with hands-on projects than with pew-sitting. We can see the immediate results of replacing broken tiles in the restroom or balancing the church budget, but what is the point of worship?

Yet there is more to worship than meets the eye. In chapter 4, The Revelation to John parts the celestial curtains and lets us look in on the worship of heaven. Our weekly worship may seem mundane and pointless, but under the x-ray of Revelation we discover the deeper meaning and inner working of our Sunday morning gatherings.

For one thing, worship brings us into the presence of God. In Scripture and preaching we hear God's word. In the Lord's Supper we eat and drink with the risen Lord. In prayer and praise we lift our hearts into the throne room of the Creator. In the offering we harness ourselves to the eternal purposes of the world's Redeemer. To put it another way, in worship we get in touch with the Source of all life, peace, joy, and purpose.

In worship we turn our attention to God. We make a conscious effort to turn away from the daily distractions, the demands, the hectic schedules, the clamor, the voices calling our name, and we give our full attention to God. To be in a loving relationship requires us to pay attention to another person, whether it is a wife or child, a parent or a close friend. Genuine attention is more than listening with one ear while our thoughts are elsewhere. Really attending to another is a kind of communion. Worship is paying attention to—or communing with—God.

Worship centers us. In John's vision the worshipers surround the throne of God on every side. In worship we grant God the proper place in the center, and we find our rightful place in orbit around God. Since we were made by God and for God, we can only establish our true identity and discover our true selves in relation to God.

Without worship we will go spinning into the void, bouncing aimlessly from one idol to another.

Worship gathers us. The twenty-four elders in the vision seem to represent both the old Israel (of twelve tribes) and the new Israel (the church built on the teachings of the twelve apostles). The four living creatures may stand for the natural world uplifted (soaring on six wings) and brought to full awareness (full of eyes). In worship we join ourselves with all of God's creatures in praise and thanksgiving.

Worship affirms God. We can learn from the deaf woman who couldn't hear a word from the preacher or a note from the choir, but went to worship every Sunday without fail because she wanted her neighbors to know whose side she was on. Worship declares that we are on God's side! Worship proclaims our loyalty to the cause of the Kingdom, establishes God's values as our values, and declares the ultimate worth of God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read Revelation 4:1-11. Since the passage is a bit long, the group members might take turns reading aloud two or three verses at a time. When the reading reaches the hymns in verses 8 and 11, the whole group could read in unison.

When the reading is finished, ask the group to pool their recall to describe aloud the scene that John describes. Include as many visual details as possible. Check the text to see what you've left out.

In the worship scene described by John, do these acts of worship remind you of anything you would be likely to take part in on a Sunday morning?

- A trumpetlike voice, saying, "Come up here."

- The array of precious stones and bright colors.

- Seven flaming torches.

- Lightning and thunder from God's throne.

-
- The sea of glass.

-
- The singing of the four creatures.

-
- Casting crowns before the throne.
-

What describing words are used in praise of God in this scene?

Think about your congregational worship. What does it say about God? Circle the words that seem to apply. Add other words if needed.

- | | | |
|-----------|---------------|--------------|
| ANGRY | FORGIVING | LOVING |
| DEMANDING | ACCEPTING | BEAUTIFUL |
| ETERNAL | INFINITE | CLOSE |
| DISTANT | GRACIOUS | DISAPPOINTED |
| JOYFUL | FEARSOME | GENTLE |
| MIGHTY | CONCERNED | INDIFFERENT |
| | UNDERSTANDING | |

How would you describe the mood of this scene? How would you describe the mood of your own worship? If the moods are different, explain why.

Do you feel that your worship experience builds you up, tears you down, or leaves you untouched? Explain your answer.

The Power of Praise

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

There is something liberating and uplifting about praising God. Praise takes our attention away from our problems and limitations and turns our eyes toward the glorious greatness of God. Praise is the perfect antidote for depression and self-absorption. In the same way that a breathtaking sunset or a beautiful piece of music or the roar of a storm can lift us out of ourselves, praise raises us to a higher reality.

Praise enlarges us by confronting us with the sheer inexpressible grandeur of God. Whatever our problems may be, we discover more and more reasons for thanksgiving as we practice the cadences of praise. We discern more clearly the nature of God as we name the persons of the Trinity with titles of adoration. We also find it easier to believe in the personal help of God as we rehearse God's mighty acts in history and in our own past.

John's use of expansive words like "myriads of myriads" and "thousands of thousands" and "forever and ever" suggests the vast scope of the praise that God deserves from us. Even an eternity of adoration will fall short of giving God the glory that is God's rightful due.

The word "Amen" is used as the finale of the worship described in Revelation 5. In some congregations, Amen is a word of closure; in others it is an exclamation of excitement or support. At its root Amen is a Hebrew word that means "yes" or "truly." John calls Jesus the Amen (Rev. 3:14), meaning that Jesus is God's eternal Yes to you and me. When we shout Amen in worship we are exclaiming our yes to the Yes of God! This is what Paul had in mind in 2 Corinthians 1:20: "For in him every one of God's promises is a 'Yes.' For this reason it is through him that we say the 'Amen,' to the glory of God." The goal of our praise is to say yes to God, not only in formal worship, but in every area of life.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Read Revelation 5:6–14 in the same manner as you read earlier in this session.

List five reasons for praising God that are mentioned in this passage:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

List five personal reasons for praising God:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Martin Luther taught that when we sing a hymn, we praise God twice: once with the mind and once with the heart. In what ways do you praise God with your mind and your heart in worship?

PRAISE WITH MY MIND	PRAISE WITH MY HEART

Which comes easier to you as a man praising God with heart and feelings or with mind and thoughts? Why do you think that's true?

Revelation is filled with songs of praise. Can you think of moments in history or in your own recollection when singing has been a source of strength and courage?

Do you praise God in your personal worship or only in the company of the congregation? Are you satisfied with your own habits of praise?

Concluding the Session

In order to find closing hymns for today you might consult the Scripture index in your hymnbook, where you will almost find several hymns inspired by

Revelation 4—5. Other possible hymns for today might be "Amen, Amen" or "Come, Christians, Join to Sing."

For your closing prayer allow a time of silence when the participants may speak single-word reasons for praise. Such words might be: family, friends, Jesus, church, rest, nature, home, etc. You may use the following form for this prayer.

"Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come, we give you thanks and praise for ..." (Allow time for participants to speak words as they come to mind.) With all your creatures in heaven and on earth we glorify your name and praise you forever! Amen and Amen!"

Afterword

A few years ago a church in Florida created their new Compact Mini 22-Minute Worship Service. The pastor guaranteed worshippers hymns, prayers, and a brief sermon that would get them out the door in no more than twenty-two minutes. The service aims at sportsmen and hobbyists who want to get on with Sunday recreation without being tied up in a traditional worship service. I wonder what John would say about Compact Mini-Worship? How do you feel about it?

Brother Lawrence was a seventeenth-century French monk. Although he was the lowly cook for his order, Lawrence became well known for what he called "the practice of the presence of God." Lawrence believed that we should always be worshipping God not only at times of formal worship but also as we go about our daily business. His secret consisted of keeping God in mind at all times and doing every task as if for God. The following description of Lawrence, from "The Practice of the Presence of God," is a challenging vision for most of us.

He was never hasty nor loitering, but did each thing in its season with an even, uninterrupted composure and tranquility of spirit. "The time of business," said he, "does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament."¹

Looking Ahead

Next week we will discuss the gifts and challenges of the church in light of Revelation 2:12-17 and 12:1-17. If your congregation has a written history, you might review it to look for times when God has given particular help to your church. Or you might phone or visit a couple of long-time members to ask when the church has been a source of strength to them.

1. From "The Practice of the Presence of God," as found in *The Guidepost Treasury of Inspirational Classics*, (Carmel, NY: Guidepost Associates, 1974), p. 123.

five

Strength in **THE CHURCH** Revelation 2:12-17; 12:1-17

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The Revelation to John presupposes the importance of the church in the life of a Christian. For instance, consider the opening statement in 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. . . ." Where else but in a congregation would we expect to find this book read aloud while a group listens? John intended this book for the church. Indeed, all Scripture is meant to be read, studied, and obeyed within the context of the community of faith. John put his visions on paper just so groups like yours could gather round these words from Christ!

Revelation emphasizes the centrality of the church in other ways as well. The messages to seven congregations are placed at the head of the book. Since seven is a number that signifies completeness for John, he probably understands these particular churches to represent the church in general. The failures, victories, and possibilities of these seven churches typify the whole church in every place and every age.

When John has the initial vision of the risen Christ, the Lord is standing among seven golden lampstands and he is holding seven stars in his right hand. Revelation 1:20 decodes the mystery of those symbols. The stars are the angels of the churches, revealing Christ's special concern and protection for the community of the faithful.

The seven lampstands are the churches themselves. Surely we must not miss the point that Christ is to be found "in the midst of the lampstands" (Rev. 1:13). Not that Christ is limited to the church, but rather Christ has chosen to reveal himself in the midst of the church. To wander from the church is to wander away from Christ!

The golden lampstand is an interesting metaphor for the church. What John probably has in mind is the seven-branched oil lamp called the menorah, which stood in the Jewish Temple. The menorah is several lamps combined in one, and the church is a gathering of many believers in one community. The work of the church is to bring light into the darkness, but, like an oil lamp, the church is not itself the light. The church is a vessel that burns with God's light.

When you walk into a room at night, you will notice that the light is on even if you don't pay attention to the light fixture. Ideally, the church doesn't draw attention to itself, but merely lights the way to God.

Perhaps your own experience has not left you with such a lofty view of the church. Admittedly, congregational life is always a mixture of nobility and pettiness, selfishness and compassion, truth and gossip, bravery and bumbling. How could it be otherwise? After all, the church is made of people! But as with worship, Revelation allows us to peer beneath the surface and see the inner reality of the church.

There is strength to be found in the church of Jesus Christ! Within the church we find the Sacraments and the Scriptures. Within the church we find teaching and guidance. Within the church we find the support and fellowship of a motley crew of sinful saints. Within the church we find challenges to grow and occasions for service. And in the midst of it all the risen Lord awaits us!

The golden lampstand of the church may seem tarnished, but look around. Where will you find anything better?

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Here is a novel way to read this week's first Bible lesson. Make a photocopy of Revelation 2:12–17 for each member of the group. Read the passage aloud in unison, and then have different colored markers or pencils available for the following.

You've probably already noticed that the letters to the seven churches follow a similar pattern.¹ On your photocopy (or in your Bible) underline verse 12 and label it **THE ADDRESS**. This names the church that is the recipient of the letter and establishes that Christ is the speaker.

What title is given to Jesus in this address?

1. Writer's note: My understanding of this pattern is indebted to Eugene H. Peterson and his book *Reversed Thunder* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

The name given to Jesus usually ties in with the content of the letter. How is that true in this case?

In a different color underline verse 13. In the margin you may label this THE AFFIRMATION. The letters to the churches typically begin with a word of praise from Christ. For what does Christ praise this congregation?

In a different color underline verses 14-16. This is THE CORRECTION, in which Christ challenges some failing of the congregation. What is the weakness of this church?

In a different color underscore verse 17 and mark it as THE MOTIVATION. Jesus promises a reward as an inspiration for the church to struggle bravely. What rewards are promised to this congregation, and what do those rewards mean to you?

The form of these letters suggests a pattern in the life of the church. Apply the pattern to your own experience with the church.

How the church has affirmed me: _____

How the church has corrected me: _____

How the church has motivated me: _____

Verse 17 also contains an urging for the readers to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches. This advice appears in each of the seven letters to the churches. How do you think the Holy Spirit speaks to churches today?

Wings In The Wilderness

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Revelation 12 is the centerpiece of John's visionary journey. In this chapter the smoldering conflict between good and evil erupts into open warfare. The devil is decisively defeated and thrown down from heaven, and on earth he tries to vent his anger on the church.

The pregnant woman clothed with the sun appears to represent the people of God. The Old Testament sometimes uses such a symbol to depict Israel. The male child who will rule the nations with rod of iron is the Christ; after all, Jesus was born from the people of God. And the red dragon is that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev. 12:9).

We are struck by the vulnerability of the woman as she labors to give birth. Her weakness is emphasized by the terrible power of the dragon, who can scatter the stars with a mere flick of his tail. As God is the giver of life, so the dragon is the enemy of all that lives. The woman in labor is the special target of the dragon's hatred because she is God's chosen people and her child will be the undoing of the devil.

Through his death resurrection, the child/Messiah is taken into heaven to the throne of God. Meanwhile, the woman seems utterly at the mercy of the dragon, but appearances are misleading. The woman flees into the wilderness to a safe refuge prepared by God. There she is fed and protected for 1,260 days. Perhaps the period of forty-two months is meant to remind us of God's loving care for Israel during the forty years in the wilderness. 1,260 days can also be understood as three and a half years. Since seven is the number of fullness, the three and one-half years of hiding from the dragon may suggest that the people of God must continue to struggle until history reaches its conclusion.

More important than the numerology is the fact of God's providence. The woman seems doomed, but God is watching out for the church! The dragon may attack God's people, but God's help is certain. The Almighty provides escape and nourishment for the church. God is so troubled by the attack on the church that war breaks out in heaven and the devil is cast out. For a little while the devil will be allowed to continue his rage

on earth, but in fact he is already defeated. The war is won. All that remains is the mopping up.

Once again the dragon lashes out at the people of God, but God once more intervenes to protect and preserve the woman. In frustration the dragon turns his wrath on the rest of the woman's children, those who hold the testimony of Jesus; this is specifically the New Testament church. But the church need have no fear of the dragon, for "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:11). The dragon's days are numbered and his power is limited. He may kill, but he may not destroy. He may ravage, but he may not steal what belongs to God. He may rage, but he cannot conquer!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Taking turns, have the group read Revelation 12 aloud, reading verses 10—12 in unison.

The woman, representing the people of God, is linked with sun, moon, and stars. What does this say to you about the church?

A man cannot give birth. However, can you describe a time when you labored and agonized to accomplish something for God?

List the ways that God protects the woman (the church) in the story. List ways that God protects the church in the world today.

PROTECTION IN THE STORY	PROTECTION TODAY

Does God's protection guarantee that Christians will never be struck by hardship or tragedy? Explain your answer.

God's strength often seems to be revealed in weakness. The church is frail and sinful, yet it has survived centuries of persecution. The cross is the symbol of weakness and death, yet the dragon is defeated by the blood of Christ.

When have you experienced God's strength in weakness or defeat?

What new thoughts or insights about the church have you encountered in this session?

Concluding the Session

If you wish to sing, any of these stirring hymns would be suitable for celebrating the church: "Great Day," "The Church's One Foundation," "My Lord! What a Morning," or "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

On a sheet of newsprint, ask the group to make a prayer list of people and ministries in your congregation. With this list in mind, you may close with the following or a similar prayer.

"Holy Spirit, give your blessings to your people. Watch over our congregation as you watch over the whole household of God. Help us to build on our strengths, correct our mistakes, and trust in your promises. Nourish us with your power, and give us wings to fly in your service; in the name of the conquering Lamb. Amen."

Afterword

"Now war broke out in heaven." . . . John writes this with a nonchalance that is staggering. Either we follow the vast majority of commentators who spiritualize this war into absurdity, or we look for a way closer to John's meaning. John is expounding a

truth that is basic to the biblical message and yet unpalatable for many. John is saying what Israel discovered in the exodus: this God in whom the church believes, out of whose love the church lives, upon whose mercy the church stands, does not and cannot leave the church alone. This God refuses to remain aloof while God's people are locked in battle with the forces of evil. God becomes passionately involved when God's people suffer and struggle for the sake of the truth. And when they cry out the heavens are disturbed. . . . Over and over the Bible rejoices in the truth that God cannot and will not simply stand on the sidelines and remain neutral. Neutrality is leaving things up to the dragon—no, taking the side of the dragon. And so in the struggle for shalom, for justice, for humanity and the true life of the church and the world, God takes sides, becomes involved, makes war on behalf of God's people.'

In the church we are always in process of being affirmed. We find those parts of our lives that are working well, and discovering them gives zest, confidence, and assurance. We are always in process of being corrected. We find those parts of our lives that aren't working well. There is a relentless quality to the word of God that insists that we face up to our sloth, our pride, our avarice—all the things that separate us from God's complete victory in us, every part that is diseased or immature, that defeats our joy or interferes with another's salvation. And we are in process of being motivated. For none of what we do in faith is short term; it is all long-range. The motivation to live strenuously for a lifetime must be adequate to sustain us through every shadowed valley and every parched wilderness. The promise of eternal life, and only the promise of eternal life, is sufficient to provide such motivation.'

Looking Ahead

Next week we will turn to Revelation 19:11–21 and 20:1-3, 7-10, passages that dramatize God's final victory over evil. In the next few days you may wish to clip newspaper stories that depict sinful powers that are in rebellion against God. These could be stories of child abuse, drug addiction, or international strife. Or you may wish to bring newspapers to the next session so that participants can look for such examples.

2. Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 84-85.

3. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 53.

six

Strength in the PROMISE OF VICTORY

Revelation 19:1 1-21; 20:1-3, 7-10

Introduction

(May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.)

"Did you hear? We got another bronze medal last night!"

"Yeah! And we've got a shot at the gold tomorrow!"

When the Olympics are in session you'll hear conversations like this in coffee shops and classrooms. We like to root for our teams and our national representatives. And the victories feel like they belong to us even though we weren't on the field or taking part in the competition. You and I may not be able to race down a snowy slope or swim a lap in record-breaking time, but we still claim the victories that belong to our country.

In a similar fashion, we can lay claim to God's universe-shaking victory that is described in Revelation 19-20. God will bring about that victory without any help from us, but God wins that victory on our behalf and invites us to share the triumphant celebration. Because we belong to God, God's victory belongs to us!

In a world rife with evil and violence, God's victory is not apparent to the naked eye. Nevertheless, God's decisive conquest of the powers of evil is an indisputable reality. If we cannot see that victory as clearly as we wish, perhaps it is because we are living "between the times."

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ has broken the back of the ancient serpent, but even a dying serpent can still lash out in terrible wrath. The Lamb has conquered, but the rebellious powers haven't gotten the message yet. We live in between the victory of Christ and the full revealing of that victory.

Christians do not have to shudder in terror or faint in despair over the evils of this present world order. All that opposes God has been judged and condemned. All the "demons" that make life so harsh and demanding have already been sentenced to the lake of fire. The torments and stumbling blocks and sins that we wrestle with have already lost the struggle. We will endure, and they will perish!

Our challenge is to live into God's victory here and now! Marva Dawn, in *Joy in Our Weakness*, calls this "seizing the meanwhile." We can find strength for the present moment by remembering that eternity has the last word. Whether we are despondent over our personal struggles or heartbroken over the injustice and suffering

in the world around us, in either case the sweeping triumph of God is already assured. We can afford to be patient. We can wait. We can rest in the grace of God. As Paul puts it, "If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:31, 35, 37). Or in John's words, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have one person read aloud Revelation 19:11-16. If more than one translation is being used in the group, ask participants to point out places in the passage where phrases or words are translated in different ways.

As John began this book with a vision of Christ, John now receives another vision of Christ at the climactic moment when evil is about to be defeated. Christ is given a variety of titles in these verses. Remember that in Revelation names reveal character. What do these names reveal about Jesus Christ?

Faithful and True _____

A Name Known Only to Himself _____

The Word of God _____

King of Kings and Lord of Lords _____

The character and nature of Christ are also revealed in his physical description. What do the following details suggest about Christ?

Riding a White Horse _____

Eyes like Flames _____

Many Crowns _____

Robe Dipped in Blood _____

Sharp Sword _____

Rod of Iron _____

1. Marva Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness* (St. Louis: Concordia Press, 1994).

How is the army of heaven dressed? Is there any significance to this?

Do you believe the armies of heaven are armed? Why or why not?

We think of Christ in different ways at different times in life. At what times in a man's life might it be helpful to pray to or meditate on Christ the Victor leading the armies of heaven?

Are there times when you would rather think of Christ in a gentler way?

The Fat Lady Is Already Singing

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Sometimes there's no need to remain for the closing minutes of a ballgame. One team is so far ahead that the outcome is beyond any doubt, so we head for the car to beat the traffic jam.

There is no doubt about the outcome of the contest between Christ and the dragon. We don't have to wait until the end of time to see who will win. We can get on with our lives, utterly certain of God's victory.

As we look at Revelation 20:1-3, 7-10, we will not attempt to puzzle out the exact order of events in the closing minutes of the Great Game. Too much ink has already been wasted in the debate over the meaning and timing of the thousand-year millennium. Instead, we will

focus on the assurance that God is in control of our destiny and nothing can thwart God's plans for the universe.

These chapters of Revelation are undeniably fierce and bloody. It may be helpful to remember that we are dealing with symbolic visions that paint their meanings with larger-than-life vividness. But more to the point, how can we doubt the righteous anger of God as the Holy One considers "ethnic cleansing," rampant militarism, starving children, sweeping environmental destruction, racism, death squads, homelessness, and state-approved torture sessions?

The dragon and his servants who have mocked the Sovereign God will not be allowed to continue poisoning God's creation and wreaking havoc among God's children. Why evil seems so strong at the moment is a knotted mystery we cannot untangle. The suffering of the innocent and the prosperity of the ruthless is an aching question that defies pat answers.

When God's people cry out "How long, O Lord?" the answer God gives us is not a theological abstraction, but the living person of Jesus Christ. The life of Jesus affirms God's concern for this hurting world. The death of Jesus reveals God's participation in our suffering. The resurrection of Jesus proves God's victory over the legions of death and hell.

The next time you lay down the newspaper in anger and grief, you might pick up your Bible and meditate on Revelation 20:7-10. In that scene the camp of God's people is surrounded. An army of evil has converged from the four corners of the earth, trampling every opposition underfoot. The regiments of hell are beyond counting, teeming like locusts beyond the horizon, and at their head Satan rides on a horse the color of blood and hatred. This is surely the end. Good has had its day. No hope is left, and love has lost.

But then the great reversal! In a fiery moment, in the blink of an eye, between one heartbeat and the next, the destroyers are destroyed in the cleansing flames of God's holiness. The banners of perdition are broken, the devil is undone for all eternity, and the Almighty reigns forever and ever. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read Revelation 20:1-3, 7-10, aloud, taking turns a few verses at a time.

John talks about the beast, the false prophet, the armies of Gog and Magog. There's no way to know for certain if John had in mind a particular meaning for each of those.

Without trying to second-guess John, what powers do you see in the world that are opposed to God's will?

What powers do you see in the church that are working against God's purposes?

What about your own life? Are there areas of your personality or lifestyle that are in rebellion against God?

We all have a tendency to notice the sins of others and to overlook our own. As we celebrate God's victory here and now, how can we avoid being smug and judgmental?

Does it really help strengthen you in daily life to remember that God is on the throne and Christ has conquered? Why or why not?

Concluding the Session

If you wish to sing today, there are many hymns that celebrate the decisive victory of Christ, such as "The Head That Once Was Crowned," "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," "The Strife Is O'er," and "Thine Is the Glory."

To close this session you may invite the group to pray a litany. Drawing on the earlier questions about powers in rebellion against God, ask each man to take a turn filling in the blank in the prayer that follows.

ALL: All praise to you, Lord God Almighty! No power in heaven or earth can challenge you!

ONE: Deliver us and our world from _____

ALL: God, give us victory! Amen!

ONE: Deliver us and our world from

ALL: God, give us victory! Amen!

(Repeat until all have taken part in the prayer.)

Afterword

Mr. Minister, you are not God. You are merely a man. And one day your name will only be a faint scribble on the pages of history while the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, lives forever.'

According to the Letter to the Ephesians, God has *already* "raised us up with (Christ) and seated us with him in the heavenly places. . . ." (2:6). As we Christians talk about evil and suffering it is comforting to realize that we already share in the reign of Christ. But we must always be careful to avoid judging others. Our conviction regarding our own salvation does not give us the right to pass judgment on those who don't meet our standards. If we must look for sins to correct, perhaps it is best if we look carefully at ourselves. How can we claim to reign in Christ if Christ does not reign in us?³

As she writes about living "in the meanwhile," Marva Dawn tells about a friend who is confined to a wheelchair.

Though he has not given up on the possibility of a miracle, Linden told me several years ago that he greatly longed for his pastor to stop praying in public worship for his healing. Such a practice enforced the attitude in the whole congregation that he was not acceptable in their midst until he was changed. He seemed to represent a failure on their part to claim God's power sufficiently, and so they could not tolerate this weakness that reminded them of their own. How much more helpful it would have been for him—and for them—if they could have learned how to pray for his life in the chair meanwhile, as he waits for the final victory over sin and pain that is indeed coming. If they could have prayed for his strength and ability to cope, then they would have learned how to be a community of support for this time. Meanwhile, also, they could have begun to learn more readily from Linden all that he has to teach about the power of God in our suffering and the victory that can only come through weakness and limitations. They might have learned from him what it means totally to depend on God and to learn the sufficiency of his grace.'

Looking Ahead

Next week we will conclude our study of Revelation with John's vision of heaven in Revelation 21:1-22:7. It will be helpful to read those passages beforehand. You may find it interesting to ask several people this week about their own ideas of heaven.

2. Bishop Desmond Tutu, as quoted in *Comfort and Protest*, by Allan A. Boesak (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), frontispiece.

3. From an unpublished sermon by Dr. Ben Samson, used by permission of the author.

4. Dawn, *Joy in Our Weakness*, pp. 30-31.

seven

Strength in the HOPE OF HEAVEN Revelation 21:1—22:7

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

The church's expectation of heaven has often been parodied as "Pie in the sky in the by-and-by." One cynical commentator responded, "I'll take my pound on the ground while I'm still around."

Sometimes the church needs to listen to its critics! The hope of heaven should not be treated as a painkiller to anesthetize the downtrodden while injustice goes unchallenged. Our eyes should not be so exclusively focused on future bliss that we fail to see the joys, opportunities, and responsibilities of the present moment. This life is not just a dress rehearsal; this world is the good gift of a good God, and we must put it to good use.

And yet, people, in general, long for some assurance that death is not the end of us. First-century Judaism, from which Christianity arose, had different opinions about the afterlife. Some believed that it was enough to know God in this life alone, and there was nothing beyond death. This was the opinion held by the Sadducees. The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Still other Jews, influenced by Greek philosophy, believed in the immortality of the soul.

While the immortality of the soul seems to be the most common belief among contemporary Christians, New Testament teaching points largely toward the resurrection of the dead. Using the idea of the first fruits, Paul teaches that the resurrection of Jesus is the model for our own future resurrection (1 Cor. 15:20), and the Risen Jesus was certainly not a disembodied ghost (Luke 24:36-43). Paul further insists that we will have "resurrection bodies" in the image of Christ (1 Cor. 15:35-57). Perhaps you will want to discuss the ideas held by participants in this session, and what it means to affirm the belief of the Apostles' Creed "in the resurrection of the body."

Even if we are uncertain about the details of our future life, we can still affirm the value of John's glorious vision of the heavenly city. The hope of heaven is not simply a narcotic to get us through a hard life. The happiest and most fulfilled person must admit to an undeniable longing that nothing in this world will satisfy. We crave an intimacy with God and with each other that remains not quite within our reach. Even as we work for peace and justice, we realize that our efforts are falling

short, and this present world order needs a renewal that is beyond our power to accomplish. The hope of heaven is the reminder that what God has begun in Jesus Christ, God will also finish.

What of those who suffer physical pain or bodily limitations that defy medical treatment? What of the innocent political prisoner dying in a lonely and comfortless cell? What of the wife of fifty years who leans close to the casket of her husband and whispers, "I'll see you in the morning"? What of the victim of schizophrenia, trapped in the incomprehensible and isolated world of a mind gone awry? The hope of heaven is the assurance that no hurt or brokenness is beyond God's power to heal.

We may find strength in knowing that the final fulfillment of heaven awaits us. But we may also find strength in knowing that heaven is, at least in part, already present with us now. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when he told his followers, "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 10:7).

Or think of it this way. John shows us that heaven is a new creation, and Paul tells us, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17). Heaven is already at work within you and me!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the

Have the group read the entirety of Revelation 21 silently

Do you believe John is trying to give a literal description of heaven? Why or why not?

Recalling that John was exiled on an island, what do you think it means that in John's vision there is no more sea? (You might also look at Revelation 12:18—13:1 for another possible answer.)

What is the shape of the city? What do you think this symbolizes about heaven?

Are you surprised that heaven is described as a city, rather than a garden? What does this say to us?

What is your favorite verse or phrase in this passage? Why are those words meaningful to you?

Make a list of the things that John says will be present in heaven, and those things that will not be in heaven. Which things on the lists seem most important to you?

Can you think of circumstances when the hope of heaven has been a source of strength to you or to people known to you?

PRESENT	NOT PRESENT

**Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor,
Your Huddled Masses**

John is quite clear that not everyone is going to heaven. As the old spiritual has it, "Ever'body talkin' `bout heaven ain't goin' there!" This is not so much an opportunity for smugness in the church as it is a warning for us to carefully examine our own lives for any areas that remain in rebellion against God.

However, in spite of John's warnings, the heavenly city he describes is remarkably open and inclusive. The dimensions of the new Jerusalem are unimaginably huge, a city of over two million square miles in area and fifteen hundred miles high! Perhaps the size of the city is a reminder of the vast scope of God's loving grace toward sinners.

How is the nearness of God expressed in John's vision of the heavenly city?

In John's vision, what sort of behavior is forbidden in the heavenly city? (See verses 8 and 27.)

Many precious stones are mentioned in the description of heaven. Gems are valued because of their ability to reflect and refract light. Can you find other references to the presence light in the heavenly city? What does light mean to you in this passage?

Most of us treat the occasional "white lie" as a harmless bit of social lubricant, but lying and falsehood are included in the list above. Perhaps God's standards of right and wrong are different from ours!

What kind of behavior do you believe God finds most offensive?

In Revelation 21:3 a voice from the throne says that God will dwell with mortals and "they will be his peoples."

Why do you believe "peoples" is plural? What "peoples" do you expect to find in heaven?

Sometimes we are tempted to identify the people of God with one particular nation or race or denomination or lifestyle. How do verses 24 and 26 speak to this prejudice?

Ancient cities like Jerusalem had walls for protection and city gates to keep out the undesirable or the unwelcome. Usually the gates were closed at sundown.

When are the gates of heaven closed? (See 21:25.) What does this mean to you?

Down By The Riverside

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Although John describes heaven as a city, we also have some inklings of the restoration of the garden of Eden in this vision. Genesis and Revelation form the brackets within which the biblical story is told. The Bible begins with God's good creation, which is cursed by the rebellion of human sinfulness. The Bible reaches its finale in the overthrow of every rebellious power and the unveiling of a new creation. Once again human beings can commune with God face-to-face as did Adam and Eve (Rev. 22:4), and the curse of sin is lifted (Rev. 22:3). The tree of life grows again, and death, the wages of our sin, is no more.

In the biblical view history is linear, not cyclical. Revelation resonates with Genesis, but not because the Bible has come full circle. Rather the vision of Revelation is the sign that God's future—the destiny and destination God had in mind from eternity—will certainly be accomplished in spite of every opposition and apparent setback. God's people are called to a new place, and no power in heaven or earth will keep us from arriving at the place God has prepared for us!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to read Revelation 22:1–7 aloud in unison. On newsprint make a list of all the uses and benefits of water that you can think of.

How do these many uses of water help us understand the river of life flowing through the center of the new Jerusalem?

What is the source of the river of life? Is there a lesson in this?

Twelve has been a recurring number in Revelation, including the description of the new Jerusalem. Most commentators see the number twelve linked to the tribes of Israel and/or the apostles of Jesus. How does this help us understand the twelve kinds of fruit of the tree of life?

What does it mean to you that the citizens of the heavenly city will see God's face and have God's name written on their foreheads?

The same Greek word for "tree" is used in Revelation 22:2 and in 1 Peter 2:24 where the writer says that Jesus "bore our sins in his body on the tree." Is this coincidental or do you see a connection between these passages?

Worship is the primary occupation of heaven. (See verse 3.) How would you answer those critics who complain that John's vision of heaven is boring?

Concluding the Session

The group might find it helpful to conclude the discussion questions by allowing everyone the opportunity to name something that they have learned from the study of Revelation. Have you gained new ideas or clarified old ones? Have you changed your thinking in any way? What questions remain unanswered for you? Do you think you will return to Revelation in the future as a source of strength?

You might conclude with any song that celebrates the glories of heaven. Especially appropriate are "O Holy City, Seen Of John," "For All the Saints," "Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand," and "Jerusalem the Golden."

You may close with the following prayer.

ONE: Lord and Savior, we hope that we have come to know you better through this study of your word.

ALL: Come, Lord Jesus!

ONE: When we are in need of help, we pray that you will give us your strength.

ALL: Come, Lord Jesus!

ONE: We pray not only for ourselves, but all who struggle and suffer.

ALL: Come, Lord Jesus!

ONE: We commit ourselves to your service in this world.

ALL: Come, Lord Jesus!

ONE: We look forward to serving you in the new Jerusalem when all things are made new.

ALL: Come, Lord Jesus!

ONE: In life and death we trust you to hold us in your hand and to bring us into your peace.

ALL: Come, Lord Jesus! Amen!

Afterword

All the way to heaven is heaven.'

God *has* pitched a tent amongst the people, for God feels at home with them. God's time amongst the people has come, and this renewed world is such that God can feel at home there.

I think I understand John. The God who longs to teach the nations how to "beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks," cannot be at home in a land "filled with horses, [where] there is no end to their chariots" (Isa. 2:4, 7). ... A God who wishes fervently that the people would understand what it means to walk in the light of the Lord cannot be at home in a world whose people have filled their land with idols, where they bow down to the work of their hands and to what their fingers have made. A God who has made human beings in God's own image cannot be at home in a world where these human beings are humbled and brought low.... A world where little children die untimely because they eat shreds of newspaper mixed with scraps of food, like the desolate children of South Africa's relocation camps—no, such a world cannot be home to the God of the exodus, of the prophets, of Jesus of Nazareth. It simply cannot be called home for the children of God's heart.'

When you are with somebody you love, you have little if any sense of the passage of time, and you also have in the fullest sense of the phrase *a good time*.

When you are with God, you have something like the same experience. The biblical term for the experience is Eternal Life. Another is Heaven.'

It is important to have a convincing rendition of this. Otherwise we settle for too little: we interpret heaven in terms of earth, instead of interpreting earth in terms of heaven. If we interpret in the wrong direction, we live either in mediocrity, unaware of the glories just past our perceptions, or in dreams that are useless to the lives we have. Heaven is not simply a dream to retreat to when things get messy and inhospitable on earth. Heaven is not fantasy. We have access to heaven now: it is the invisibility in which we are immersed, and that is developing into visibility, and that one day will be thoroughly visible. As the poet Robert Browning put it, "Earth's crammed with heaven."⁴

1. Catherine of Siena, from *Living Quotations for Christians*, Sherwood Eliot Wirt and Kersten Beckstrom, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), no. 1429.

2. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, pp. 130-31.

3. Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 21.

4. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p. 172.