



LEADER S GUIDE

Once upon a time...

Session 1

Revelation 1.1-3.22

Session Objectives:

- Begin developing positive relationships within your small group
- Understand the various ways of reading Revelation and what is at stake in our interpretation
- Understand the issues facing the Christian churches in the first century
- Experience Revelation as a work of poetry, experiential theology, and pastoral encouragement

Note that the study guide is divided into sections. The **For Devotions** part is intended to set the proper context for our study. By sharing prayer concerns, it also helps strengthen your group relationships. The **For Openers** section is intended to be a non-threatening way to break the ice and get people to begin to talk. The questions do set up some of the issues posed by the study. The **For Your Information** section deals mostly with background, facts, and details related to the text. The heart of each study is really the **For Your Discussion** section. Try to spend as much time as possible on this part. There are a variety of types of questions that ask participants to reflect on and relate to the text. You will probably not have time to work through all the questions, so you should pick up some ahead of time that you think are the most important. The **For Later** section is intended for people to do later outside of the group time on their own.

For Your Information:

I think it will be important to spend some time working with the grid on “How do you read Revelation?” The issues involved apply to our reading of the Bible in general, but they are particularly critical in the case of Revelation. The main issue probably involves one’s view of the rapture, tribulation, and millennium. The various interpretations of these topics should not cause harmful and irreparable divisions between Christians. In this study, I will be giving little attention to these matters, because I believe that is unhelpful to read Revelation as a blueprint for the future rather than as a message for today. Furthermore, those who do speculate on the rapture and tribulation and sequence of events invariably end up endlessly disagreeing on details and oftentimes miss the message of hope and encouragement Revelation provides. I provide some discussion of the terms and issues involved on the Background Information sheet.

One of the things to remember about the book of Revelation (note the singular) is that, as it says in 1.1, it is “the revelation of Jesus Christ.” It is a revelation by Jesus and about Jesus. With its emphasis on hearing and seeing, the book also attempts to immerse the reader/hearer in an experience of God and the certainty of the coming kingdom.

It is helpful to note that the expressions used to describe each of the seven churches reflect actual situations in those churches. (See the Background Information sheet.)

CHURCH	COMMENDATIONS	CONDEMNATIONS	ADMONISHMENTS and PROMISES
Ephesus 2.1-7	Toil; patient endurance; cannot tolerate evildoers; tested false apostles; bearing up for sake of my name; not grown weary; hate works of Nicolaitans	Abandoned the love you had at first	Remember; repent; do the works you did at first <i>permission to eat from tree of life</i>
Smyrna 2.8-11	Have affliction and poverty but really are rich		Do not fear to suffer; beware of devil, prison, affliction; be faithful until death <i>and I will give you crown of life</i>
Pergamum 2.12-17	Holding fast to my name; did not deny your faith	Some hold to teaching of Balaam / Nicolaitans (eat food sacrificed to idols, practice fornication)	Repent <i>given hidden manna and white stone with secret name</i>
Thyatira 2.18-29	Works, love, faith, service, patient endurance	Tolerate Jezebel who teaches fornication and eating food sacrificed to idols	(To the faithful) hold fast <i>I will give the morning star</i>
Sardis 3.1-6	Some who are worthy	Think you’re alive, but you’re dead; works are not perfect	Wake up; strengthen what remains; remember what you received and heard; obey it and repent <i>will not blot out; will confess your name</i>
Philadelphia 3.7-13	Have little power but have kept my word and not denied my name		Hold fast <i>keep you from trial; make you a pillar; name</i>
Laodicea 3.14-22		Neither hot nor cold but lukewarm; think they are rich but are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, naked	Buy from me gold and white robes and salve; be earnest and repent <i>come in and eat; give place on throne</i>

For Discussion:

- 1) Try to sketch out the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of the various dynamics of reading Revelation. Some factors that I think are important to remember include:
 - Revelation, regardless of whom we think the author exactly is or how we decide to interpret it, is the inspired Word of God written for the instruction and encouragement of all Christians.
 - It is important to keep in mind the context within which Revelation was written. Its initial audience (members of the seven churches) was the primary audience, and any interpretation we arrive at must also be one that those early Christians could have discerned.
 - The imagery of Revelation is symbolic, but that does not mean that it is imaginary or untruthful. Revelation does intend to help us experience something specific about Jesus and about the ultimate achievement of God's will and lordship. Revelation expresses the truth, but this does not mean that it needs to be taken literalistically. (Note the characteristics of apocalyptic literature described on the Background Information sheet.)
 - Revelation is grounded in the past (when it was written and its first audience), but it does have something to say about what it perceives to be an assured future. As the Word of God, however, its message has always been for the "now" of Christians in every generation.
 - The truth of Revelation must always be consistent in some way with the whole Scripture and especially with the Gospel as it has been revealed in Christ.
- 2) To someone who is suffering or dying, I do not see how it is much comfort to get into an explanation of the details of a pre-tribulation rapture or the differences between pre- or post-millennial theories. Instead, the power of Revelation is in its assurance that indeed nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8.38-39), that there is a life after death in a heavenly existence with God, and that ultimately God's justice and authority will be established in an everlasting kingdom.
- 3) Excluding the prologue and epilogue, we see that the book of Revelation basically begins and ends with Christ, the Alpha and Omega (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). The outline also shows how interspersed among all the horrors of evil which afflict the saints are found heavenly visions. They serve to reinforce the promise that even in the midst of our sufferings there is the greater reality of God's kingdom always active and present.
- 4) How soon is soon? It is my conviction that the message of Revelation was just as relevant and immediate for those Christians in the first century as it is for us today.
- 5) As we read through the rest of Revelation we will gain a greater sense of the tension with and even hostility towards the pagan/Roman social system in which those Christians lived. We do have evidence of Roman emperors (notably, Domitian) who claimed divine honors for themselves. Failing to worship the emperor could have severe repercussions. Participation in trade guilds and other social clubs oftentimes involved invoking some god or goddess and eating food offered to that deity. To refuse to participate in these activities would also separate a Christian from his community, friends, and family.
- 6) I suspect that most Christians picture Jesus as the compassionate shepherd who welcomes small children or perhaps as a great teacher and prophet or as the savior who died and rose again. In any case, most of our pictures of Jesus are likely warm and fuzzy ones. Revelation gives us at the outset a picture of a terrifying Jesus with a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. It is a good reminder that Jesus is also the eternal Lord who will come again to judge the living and the dead.
- 7) Works of faith, love, service and patient endurance are commended. Those churches that have held fast in the midst of persecution are especially praised. Churches that have lost their original enthusiasm about the faith and have become "lukewarm" are condemned. Special condemnation is reserved for those who eat food offered to idols and practice fornication. Most often, the churches are asked to repent or to hold fast to their faith in Christ.
- 8) This question starts us on the track of appreciating what the early Christians experienced and drawing parallels with our own experience.
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