



# Remembering God's Future

A five session Season of Prayer guide inspired by the book of Revelation

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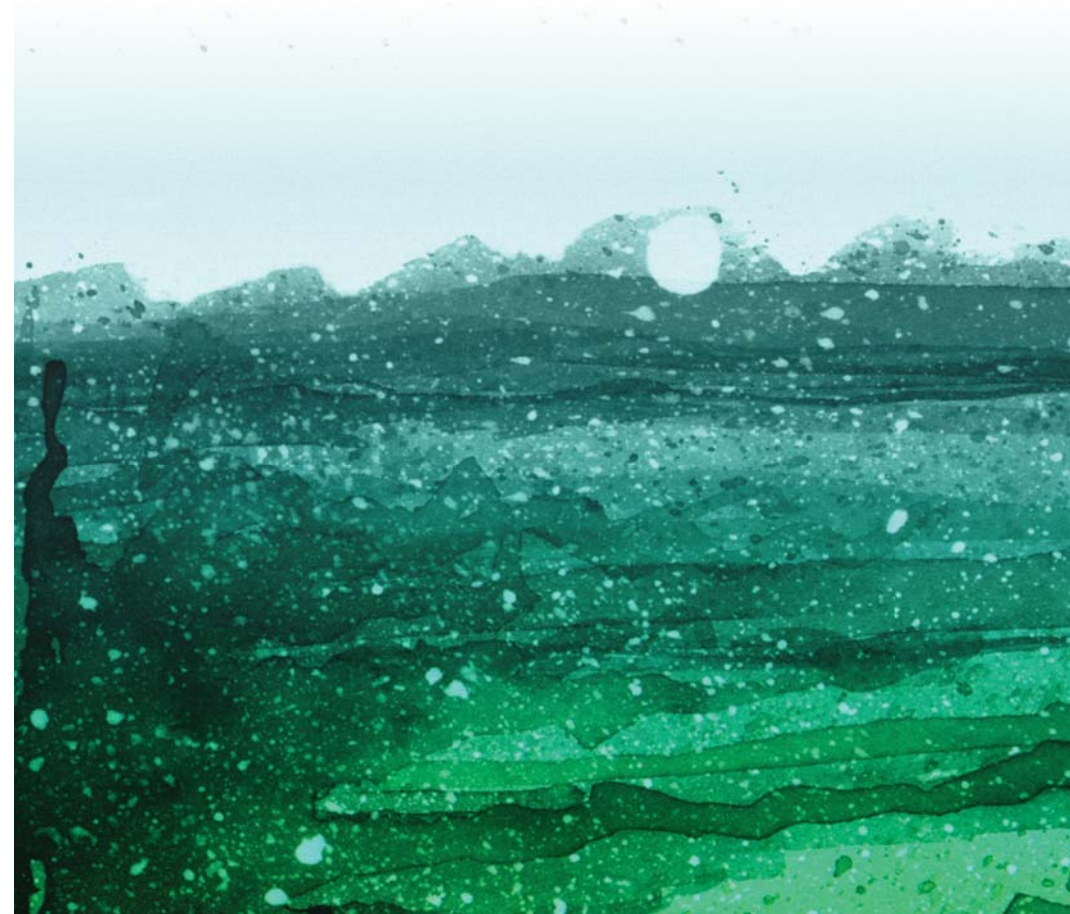
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Loren L. Johns

## A history of Prayer week/Season of Prayer

1988	Lord teach us to pray (aspects of prayer; 1 <sup>st</sup> goal of kingdom commitments)	Variety of writers
1989	Called to serve (2 <sup>nd</sup> goal of kingdom commitments)	Variety of writers
1990	Called to give (4 <sup>th</sup> goal of kingdom commitments)	Variety of writers
1991	Our call to kingdom goals (kingdom commitments)	Variety of writers
1992	Communicating with God (home & church; psalms as prayer: prayer, lament, healing)	Variety of writers
1993	The fruits of faithfulness Galatians 5.22	Variety of writers
1994	Understanding prayer? Prayer in the community of faith, through the Word, as Spiritual Warfare, as Spiritual Formation, Prayer & fasting	Variety of writers
1995	The Lord's Prayer	Arthur Boers
1996	Hospitality	April Yamasaki
1997	Gladly Regulate (faithfulness in context of social change, economic disparity, dividing nationalism)	Vern Ratzlaff
1998	The Lamb has conquered: Revelation	Phil Bender
1999	Praying the beatitudes of Jesus (embodying the gospel)	Lois Barrett
2000	Hope and prayer in the new Millennium	Dan Epp-Tiessen
2001	Prayer in the presence of God (invitation to prayer)	Claire Ewert Fisher
2002	Shalom: the healing work of God	Henry Paetkau
2003	God will open to us a door (Col 2.4) (prayer in home & family)	Doug Klassen
2004	Prayer: in the Peace of Christ (peacemaking)	Melissa Miller
2005	Praying over the broken body of Christ (unity) (1 Corinthians)	Dan Nighswander
2006	Revelling in God's Love: Praying with Psalm 36 (Change to "Season of Prayer" from "Prayer week")	Sue C. Steiner
2007	Walls: Divine and Dividing-"something there is that does not like a wall". (Ephesians 2:11-22.)	Brian Dyck
2008	Built to Last – (1Corinthians 3:11)	Tom Yoder Neufeld
2009	Signs of God at the Crossroads (Deut 4:1-9)	Artur Bergen and assoc.
2010	Reclaiming Jesus (Col. 3:12-17)	Patty Friesen
2011	Faith and Hope in the midst of changing times (variety of texts)	Dan Epp-Tiessen
2012	It's Epic: Remembering God's Future (Revelation 21 and 22)	Loren Johns

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- 31 For a good translation of the so-called Apostolic Fathers, which includes the Martyrdom of Polycarp, see *The Apostolic Fathers: English Translations*, ed. and rev. by Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).
- 32 See Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (New York: Heritage, 1946 [originally published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century]).
- 33 See Tina Pippin, “Eros and the End: Reading for Gender in the Apocalypse of John,” in *Semeia* 59, ed. David Jobling, Tina Pippin, and the Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), 193–210. See also Pippin’s *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1992).
- 34 For a good introduction to the problems here, see Betsy J. Bauman-Martin, “Women on the Edge: New Perspectives on Women in the Petrine *Haustafel*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123 (2004): 253–280. See also Mary Schertz, “God’s Cross and Women’s Questions,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68/2 (1994); Rachel Reesor, “Atonement: Mystery and Metaphorical Language,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 682 (1994); *Peace Theology and Violence Against Women*, ed. Gayle Gerber Koontz. Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992; and Lydia Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion and the Gospel of Mark* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998).



Mennonite Church Canada

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by  
Loren L. Johns

# About the Author



Professor Loren L. Johns, who led the Bible Studies on Revelation at the 2011 Assembly, is Professor of New Testament at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) in Elkhart, Indiana. He is a noted presenter on themes found in the book of Revelation, the Left Behind Series, and Anabaptist-Mennonite approaches to Biblical Interpretation. Loren has published numerous articles and edited several books. His primary areas of research include New Testament Greek, the letters of Paul, the Johannine Literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the development of the biblical canon, and eschatology. He has worked on several

publications, including *Even the Demons Submit: Continuing Jesus' Ministry of Deliverance*; *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into Its Origin and Rhetorical Force*; and *Apocalypticism and Millennialism: Shaping a Believers Church Eschatology for the 21st Century*. Prior to coming to AMBS in 2000, he served as a pastor, theology book editor, and college Bible professor. Loren holds a PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary.

- 19 There is, in fact, a textual question at this point. Most of the later manuscripts have the singular, but several of the oldest manuscripts and several of the early church fathers have the plural. Based on the age and quality of the manuscripts, the probability is that the plural is the preferred reading. This fits also with the probability that a scribe would have been more likely to change an original plural to fit with the traditional singular than the other way around. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 688.
- 20 This quotation and the ideas expressed in the previous paragraph are from Boring, *Revelation*, 228.
- 21 *Glorious Appearing* (Tyndale House), 208.
- 22 *Glorious Appearing* (Tyndale House), 258.
- 23 Nicholas D. Kristof, Op.-Ed., *New York Times*, 14 Jul 2004.
- 24 Tim LaHaye, Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 23 Jul 2004.
- 25 Chapter divisions were added to Revelation about 1,000 years after it was written.
- 26 A few commentators, like G. B. Caird, argue that what looks like judgment in 14:14-20 is actually a portrayal of mass martyrdom. Although the view is attractive, I don't think it is ultimately convincing. If something needs to be added for the statement to make sense, *people* would be a better choice.
- 27 William Greenough Thayer Shedd and Alan W. Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2003; orig. pub. 1888), 866.
- 28 There is no polemic against "works" in Revelation as we occasionally see in Paul. Good works are simply expressions of faithfulness. Which are consistently praised in this book (see 2:2, 5, 19, 22-23, 26; 3:8; 14:13; 19:8; 20:12-13; 22:12), while bad works (a lack of faithfulness or a failure to maintain consistent resistance) are condemned (see 2:6, 23; 3:1-2, 15; 9:20; 16:11; 18:6; 20:12-13; 22:12).
- 29 This particular word means specifically a person who bears witness, not the witness that a person gives. While closely related, the Greek uses two different nouns for the person and the thing. The verb *martyreō* (to testify or bear witness) occurs in 1:2 and 22:16, 18, 20. The noun *martyria* (testimony or witness) occurs in 1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10; and 20:4. The underlined passages are those that modify the noun with "Jesus." That is, John is talking about "the testimony of Jesus," meaning either testimony *about* Jesus or the testimony that Jesus *gives* (or possibly both). Furthermore, in 1:2, 9; 6:9; 12:17; and 20:4, this testimony is closely related to "the word of God." Finally, the noun *martyr* (a *person* who testifies or bears witness) occurs in 1:5; 2:13; 3:14; 11:3; and 17:6. Jesus is the prototypical witness/martyr and John uses the word nearly equally for Jesus and others who bear witness like Jesus did (and are therefore martyred as Jesus was). The entire word group is quite an important one for understanding the message of Revelation.
- 30 For a discussion of the dating of these books and the reasoning behind these judgments, see David Arthur DeSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Context, and Significance* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002), 268-270 and 355-356.

- 8 David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis,” *Interpretation* 38 (January 1984): 39–50; the quotation is from p. 41.
- 9 Donald Guthrie, “The Lamb in the Structure of the Book of Revelation,” *Vox Evangelica* 12 (1987), 64–71; the quotation is from p. 64.
- 10 The Mishnah was written down about AD 200 and ostensibly was composed of all the commandments God had given orally to Moses at Mt. Sinai that had never previously been written. The Talmudim are two collections of interpretations of the Mishnah by various rabbis compiled several hundred years later, one in Palestine and one in Babylon.
- 11 The Aquila superscript indicates that although *arnion* does not appear in the standard translation of the Septuagint, it does in the translation prepared by Aquila early in the second century AD. It was known for the woodenly literal character of the translation.
- 12 The Greek word *hypomonē* is important in Revelation, where it appears more often than in any other book of the New Testament (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12) – and at crucial points. It is usually translated “patient endurance,” but Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza rightly objects to that translation as sounding too passive, too wimpy (see Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 4, 182). I agree with her that “consistent resistance” does a better job of expressing its meaning, though nonviolence is also essential to it. Hence, “consistent nonviolent resistance” would be an even better choice. *Hypomonē* is the key ingredient in the victory of the martyrs in 4 Maccabees, a philosophical treatise written around the time of Jesus that praises the virtue of martyrdom and the *hypomonē* that leads to it. (For *hypomonē* in 4 Maccabees, see 1:11 (twice); 7:9; 9:8; 15:30; 17:4.) Note that the martyrs of 2 Maccabees 7 and 4 Maccabees were anything but passive or wimpy!
- 13 Cf. Dennis L. Stamps, “The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament as a Rhetorical Device: A Methodological Proposal,” in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2006), 19.
- 14 M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*; Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 215–216.
- 15 David Noel Freedman, editor in chief, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 484.
- 16 George Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*; New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 304.
- 17 Where the NRSV has “saints,” the Greek has nothing. A more literal translation would read, “You ransomed for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Adding the word *saints* unnecessarily skews the text.
- 18 In each case here, the italics indicate my emphasis.

# Table of Contents

Foreword.....	2
Introduction.....	4
Session 1: A New Heaven and a New Earth.....	9
Session 2: The Lamb.....	17
Session 3: Light .....	26
Session 4: Gates .....	35
Session 5: Blessing.....	45
For Further Study.....	55
Endnotes.....	55



# Foreword

This *Season of Prayer* series traces its roots to 1988 and is unfortunately coming to completion with this final 2012 issue (see the list of writers and topics on the back inside cover).

When I was on the Resources Commission of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (predecessor to Mennonite Church Canada) in the mid-1990s, discerning the topic and potential writers for what we then called “Prayer Week” still filled a major block of the meeting agenda. After the denominational transformation and the birth of the Formation Council in 2002, this became a staff-managed project. In 2006, the title changed to “Season of Prayer” to encourage its usage throughout the year, rather than only in the first week of January, a common practice in Western Canada.

Mennonite Church Canada Assembly delegates also noted that these themed materials could help our congregations engage more deeply with the biblical focus at our national gatherings. More recently, these Assembly Bible studies, linked to the theme in Season of Prayer, have become available as audio files via [www.mennonitechurch.ca](http://www.mennonitechurch.ca).

This year, because constituents have requested more help with studying Revelation through an Anabaptist lens, we decided to videotape the Assembly presentations that focused on Revelation. Once the process of editing and preparing this material has been completed, it will be available as a video resource for congregational Bible study.

Why is *Season of Prayer* print material coming to an end? Times change, and so do the ways we resource our congregations. The formerly strong tradition, in our Western Canada faith family of beginning the New Year with a week of Bible study and prayer is being replaced by other faith practices. And, with staff reductions in 2011, leadership has determined that the staff time and resources used to develop, promote, and distribute annual Season of Prayer materials are needed elsewhere. This concluding issue is being completed by me, the former Director of Christian Nurture, which has now evolved into a half-time Formation Consultant position, largely in my private time, as a labour of love for the church.

## For Further Study

My three favourite commentaries on Revelation in English are:

- *Revelation*, by John R. Yeatts. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003.
- *Revelation*, by Mitchell G. Reddish. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001.
- *Revelation*, by M. Eugene Boring. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989.

And some of my favourite books for understanding how Revelation informs faithful living today are:

- *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation*, by J. Nelson Kraybill. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2010.
- *Triumph of the Lamb: A Self-Study Guide to the Book of Revelation*, by Ted Grimsrud. Wipf & Stock, 1998.
- *Revelation: New Heaven on a New Earth*, by Philip Bender. Faith and Life Bible Studies. Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1985.

## Endnotes

- 1 Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43.
- 2 Cf. John B. Toews, *Romans* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2004), 63; cf. also Neal Elliott, chap. 6, “Apostolic Praxis: Living Out the Dying of Jesus,” in *Liberating Paul* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 181–230.
- 3 For an excellent investigation of how involvement in commerce and in local trade guilds may have affected the lives of first-century believers in Asia and what connection that might have to the critique of emperor worship found in Revelation, see J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse*; Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, no. 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).
- 4 As noted by the early church leader Irenaeus in his *Against the Heretics* 5.30.3, written about AD 180.
- 5 Philip Bender, “Revelation 21–22: Background Planning Reflections Prepared in Advance of Assembly 2011” (Winnipeg: Mennonite Church Canada, 2010).
- 6 “Second Temple Judaism” refers to the period of time during which the second Temple was standing (c. 515 BC–AD 70). In biblical terms, this would be when the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans were in power.
- 7 M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*; Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989) 108.

accompaniment God continues to provide for us when we witness to God's way in challenging circumstances. Remember specific, challenging circumstances where God provided the courage and counsel you needed, and offer thanks for the blessings that accompany suffering for God's sake.

3. Prayers of confession and petition: Reflect silently on the difficulties we – personally and as a community of faith – have in accepting the costs of discipleship. Offer God your feelings of ambivalence, defensiveness, and confusion about the role of consistent non-violent resistance and the suffering that could result from such a witness as a confession, in spoken phrases or within the silence of your hearts. Conclude this part of the prayer time by praying with STJ 167.
4. Prayers of intercession: Widen the circle of your prayer focus by praying for the courage and discernment that is needed for engaging in God-pleasing acts of consistent non-violent resistance today in the lives of your family members, intimate circle of friends, congregation, denomination in Canada and globally, and the church in all its diversity and struggles. Finally, pray that the Jesus who invites us to the marriage supper of the slaughtered, victorious Lamb, might be increasingly worshiped and followed by all who call on his name.

### **Closing Litany**

Close the prayer time with one of the following litanies, STJ 158 or 153.

I find myself in good company with the many others who have shared their gifts with the church in this way. Since 1988, many pastors and Bible teachers have volunteered their time, talents, and efforts to write these materials. Their honoraria remained small. A significant investment by a whole team of staff has gone into recruiting writers, editing, copy-editing, designing, formatting, printing, promoting, and distributing these materials. Mennonite Church Canada has never charged users more than the printing cost for these materials. It has been a labour of love by all, and has been done to help bind our faith community together in study and prayer around the word of God.

Pre-existing study guides will remain available to the church as an ongoing resource, for free download. Thank you to all who have contributed and embraced these study and prayer guides. May God bless you richly.

God remains at work among us, Revelation helpfully reminds us that Jesus has won the most important battle. God's future is epic indeed.

Shalom,

Elsie Rempel  
Formation Consultant  
Mennonite Church Canada

# Introduction

*by Karen Martens Zimmerly, Denominational Minister & Director of Leadership Development, Mennonite Church Canada*

Many people find the book of Revelation a mysterious puzzle and ignore it because they don't have the tools to help them understand the text. Other people are eager to leap to what Revelation may mean for us today and pay little attention to understanding the book in the context of its time or as part of the framework of the entire biblical story – from Genesis through to Revelation. Either response can cause Christians to miss the inspiring vision, or panoramic picture, of the Revelation puzzle. As any successful puzzler will know, paying attention and building the framework are both essential for unscrambling and recreating the fractured picture.

Puzzle building is an activity that a number of generations in my extended family have enjoyed. As a child, I observed my father searching for all the edge pieces first to build the frame. Then, using the picture on the box, pieces would be sorted according to sections of major colour or shading. This became the process for taking the chaotic pile of 1000 pieces, building small sections of the puzzle at a time, and eventually putting the whole picture together.

This is also the approach I invite you to take with this study and prayer guide. While we will only work and pray with material from one fascinating and inspiring corner of the “Revelation puzzle,” it is still essential to build the frame before we sort and reconnect the puzzling, beautiful words from Revelation 21 and 22 that inspired Mennonite Church Canada's 2011 Assembly. And once we have the frame, we will let Professor Loren Johns ably lead us in sorting and assembling the epic vision of God's future, as he did for the participants of the *It's Epic: Remembering God's Future* Assembly, in Waterloo, 2011.

The study and prayer materials that follow are rich. I hope each and every one of you can engage it to its fullest. If a group study format leaves you short on time, I encourage you to start each session by first choosing one or two of the study questions, and then to work backward through the material to glean information and inspiration that is relevant to the chosen question(s). The fullness of the topic can always be encountered again on an individual basis, or at a later time.

3. What kind of power do you have in your social circles? Are there ways in which you support or want to support the *status quo*? Do you see ways in which you might destabilize unjust structures of power in your social context? What is God asking you to do in this area?
4. At what point does one cross the line between a courageous readiness to die for one's faith and a pathological desire for martyrdom? Does such a line exist? How do we compare John's blessing of Christian martyrs with the suicide bombers who die for causes they believe in today?
5. What do you see as the greater danger for the church today – a pathological “martyr complex” marked by an over-eagerness to die for one's faith ... or lack of commitment to anything outside of ourselves? Why is this? Can you imagine dying for anything? For what or for whom would you die? What does this reveal about your ultimate allegiance?
6. Menno Simons taught that one of the marks of the true church is that it is a suffering church. Do you agree with Menno? Can a church be a faithful church if it is not suffering? Why or why not?

## Prayer

Comfortable Christians would make up all sorts of excuses to avoid some of the blessings of Revelation (cf. Luke 14:16-24).

While these blessings continue to provide courage for those who are suffering for their consistent witness to Christ's way, they challenge those of us who live in a tolerant society which generally honours faith-based commitments. Our heart response to this session, including our ambivalence about suffering, is what we need to bring before God in prayer, trusting that God will guide us and help us discern the appropriate and faithful response for our context.

You may want to begin your time of prayer by distributing white pieces of cloth, as symbols of the white robes of the martyrs. Hold the cloth in open, upturned hands as an offering to God and sing the song STJ 81 *Take, O take me as I am*. Allow God to guide both your emotions and your intellect as you lead participants in this holy, preparatory activity.

1. Listening prayer: Become silent and listen to the scripture text with your heart. Hold the text gently and wait for it to speak into your reality.  
“Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.”
2. Prayers of gratitude: Express your gratitude for the faithfulness of many witnesses to Christ through the ages. Give thanks for the courage God has provided for faithful witnesses in the past and for the courage and



But does John understand martyrdom as a good thing, a virtue to be sought? I do not agree with Tina Pippin's charge that the Apocalypse exhibits an "ideology of death" in which death is a thinly veiled desire on the part of John – especially the death of women.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, her sensitivity on this point is valuable. In the history of the church the scriptural admonitions addressed to slaves and women (e.g., in 1 Peter) to endure unjust and terrifying situations patiently have all too easily and commonly been used to justify violence against women and even to glorify suffering with the result that the submissive victim is held up as a model for women!<sup>34</sup>

The praise of martyrdom can easily become praise of both death and suffering for their own sakes and that is wrong as well as dangerous. History has known too many examples of powerful men praising suffering and death in order to keep the powerless in their place and to support the power structures of the *status quo*. ***The praise and blessing of martyrdom in Revelation has integrity only if and when it destabilizes unjust structures of power by giving courage to the powerless.*** Although some post-colonial readings of Revelation state or assume that John wrote from a position of privilege and power, it seems to me that he wrote from a position of powerlessness as a prisoner banished on Patmos – from the underside of history and the underside of power.

To be fair with Revelation, martyrdom itself is not praised in the book, though the author comes preciously close to doing so. What the author praises is a faithful witness (1:2, 9; 12:11; and elsewhere) and consistent nonviolent resistance (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; and esp. 14:12), both of which he fully expects will result in martyrdom. ***Martyrdom is a victory because it seals that witness and that consistent resistance, but it is not itself good, it is tragic.*** Similarly, suffering is not itself good, but rather tragic. Such taking of life is worthy of the harshest of judgments in Revelation (see esp. 16:5-7). Any discussion of the virtue of martyrdom or of blessings on those who take their faithful witness all the way to martyrdom must be aware of these power issues.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Reflection and prayer time for this session could helpfully focus on Blessing 1, 3, 6, and 7 without ignoring the others. These seem to connect with the theme of faithful hearing and faithful discipleship and serve to encourage endurance and consistent resistance, which is John's pastoral concern in the whole book.
2. What has been your experience with the praise of suffering and servanthood in the church? Have you ever seen it used by people in power to maintain the status quo, whether consciously or unconsciously? Be sure to listen to the voices of the powerless and marginalized in your context as you reflect on this.

### Building the framework: Answering the five Ws of Revelation:

**Who is this book about?** Jesus Christ is the central character of Revelation (1:1). John is the one who receives the revelation and is to share it with the church, but the focus of the entire book is revealing the One who is in control—Jesus Christ.

**To whom is the book written?** Revelation was written to the seven churches that were scattered across Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea (chapters 2 and 3).

**When was it written?** Revelation was written at the end of the first century, probably around 95 CE.

**Where?** Revelation 1:9,10 states that John was on the island of Patmos, which is in the Aegean Sea, just off the coast of Asia Minor (current Turkey) when he received this revelation.



**What kind of literature is found in Revelation?** Revelation is made up of three forms of literature:

1. **Apocalypse:** a genre of literature that emphasizes direct revelation from God to a human in the form of a story. The story can include supernatural revealing of truths and use symbols extensively. Through these means God's final salvation of humanity as well as God's judgement on evil, is revealed. Apocalyptic literature focuses on the ending of the current era and the dramatic inauguration of the age to come. While Revelation resembles this genre, it is unique in that the key event is not in the future, but has already happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the most critical part of the framework for understanding everything that John writes down. The four words: life, death, resurrection, and Jesus could be considered the corner pieces of the puzzle.
2. **Prophecy:** literature which emphasizes God's perspective on human affairs. While prophecy can speak of God's vision for the future, those who use these biblical texts for predicting the future and setting dates for the world's end miss the point of Revelation. The primary prophetic purpose of Revelation is to say: Wake up and be faithful to God in your current situation!
3. **Letter:** a written correspondence from one party to another. Revelation includes letters in chapters one, two and three. These letters to the seven churches set the original historical and faith context for who would first hear God's revelation given to John.

### **Why was Revelation given to the churches?**

At the end of the first century, the young Christian church found itself living in the context of powerful and wealthy imperial Rome. Evil was seductive and Emperor worship was popular as the prevailing culture.

Evil and popular culture can still seduce us. When it comes in the form of disguised evil or false beauty, the church today, as then, can be tempted to turn from its allegiance to Christ to the ever present seductions of empire. The book of Revelation, in all its drama, power, and mystery, is God's word that calls the church, though the ages, to be faithful and confident in following God's way and to resist the ways of empire, as powerful as it may seem. We are called to resist and remember that the world is in God's hands.

As we compare Revelation to a picture puzzle, we must regard its picture as an impressionist painting rather than a photograph. Revelation uses the language, symbols, and images of poets, artists, and dreamers, rather than the tools of modern historians and event planners who are concerned with accuracy and minute details. A brief overview of the first 20 chapters cannot fill in all the

the book of Revelation itself played an important role in the word's historical transition to mean someone who dies for their faith.

If the reader has any questions about whether the final blessing on "those who wash their robes" refers to martyrdom, the best answer comes in Revelation 7:14. To wash one's robes is to make them "white in the blood of the Lamb." That is, to die a martyr's death, which is confirmed also in Revelation 6:9-11, where "those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given" were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until more were "killed as they themselves had been killed."

### **Is Martyrdom Deserving of Praise?**

Although martyrdom is portrayed as the ultimate victory in Revelation, we need to be careful about what the author is and is not saying here. There is no question that before Revelation was written, there was already a strong and vibrant tradition of honouring and praising martyrdom. We see this tradition developing in Daniel 3, which was written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC; in 2 Maccabees 7, which was accepted as authoritative by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists; and more fully in 4 Maccabees, which is accepted by the Ethiopian Orthodox as authoritative Scripture. Second Maccabees was written in the first century BC as a summary of a work likely written by 100 BC. Fourth Maccabees was likely written in the first half of the first century AD.<sup>30</sup>

Within a few years, early church leaders were welcoming martyrdom as if it were itself a good thing. For instance, Polycarp was an early church leader who was also appointed bishop of Smyrna, one of the seven churches to which Revelation was written. Ignatius of Antioch wrote letters to this church leader within 15 or 20 years of when Revelation was written. Polycarp welcomed martyrdom and was actually martyred in his old age (around AD 155 to 160). "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" is an account of his execution in which Polycarp maintains faithful witness and seems even to welcome martyrdom. He even chides the proconsul, "Bring it on!" (11.2).<sup>31</sup>

The Martyrdom of Polycarp exhibits a moderate, measured attitude toward martyrdom in comparison to some of the later leaders in the early church, who took their praise of martyrdom to great lengths. As a result of the great zeal with which martyrdom was actually sought out, in AD 306 the Council of Elvira passed a canon specifying that if anyone is executed for overthrowing idols, they would not be counted as a martyr, since the act is not commended in the gospels nor was it done by the apostles.<sup>32</sup>

The “millennial” disputes centre on whether Christ will return before or after a thousand-year reign (millennium) on earth and generally miss the discipleship mandate of the book of Revelation.

**Amillennialism:**  
The belief that the thousand-year reign mentioned in Revelation 20 is largely symbolic, not literal. It is only literal to the extent that it began with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost and will end at the return of Christ when the kingdom of God is fully realized.

**Post-millennialism:**  
An interpretation of Revelation 20 that positions the return of Christ after the thousand-year reign anticipated in Revelation 20.

**Pre-millennialism:**  
The belief that Christ will return before the thousand-year reign anticipated in Revelation 20.

In my view, the text of Revelation 20 supports none of the major theological options here. The immediate context in Revelation implies that the “first resurrection” is limited to those who were beheaded and who come to life (in the “first resurrection”) in order to reign with Christ 1,000 years (see 20:4-6). The text further implies that the second resurrection applies to the “rest of the dead,” who *are* mentioned in Revelation and who will rise *after* the 1,000 years. Whether John is imagining this number to include other believers who were not martyred, or unbelievers, is not clear. Revelation 20:6 implies that the “second death” refers to some final judgment. In any case, the blessing seems to rest on those who are martyred for their faith and who rise from the dead in order to reign with Christ for 1,000 years.

#### **6. Blessed Is the One Who Keeps the Words of the Prophecy of This Book (22:7)**

This brings us to the final two blessings in Revelation, both of which appear in the final chapter. The one in v. 7 is closely related to the first of the seven blessings in 1:3. The sixth blessing emphasizes the ethical message of this book: this is a word to keep – a word to respond to with faithfulness.

To keep the words of the prophecy is to do “good works.”<sup>28</sup> The heart of this ethical message is to worship only God and the Lamb and to maintain a faithful witness, which includes resisting consistently and non-violently. The first of these emphasizes the importance of one’s proper orientation to the Creator, while the second emphasizes the reality of humanity’s rebellion against the Creator and the resulting challenges that rebellion can represent for believers. The blessing comes closest to our current understanding of Christian discipleship.

#### **7. Blessed Are Those Who Wash Their Robes (22:14)**

One of the troubling features of Revelation is its emphasis on martyrdom. The word *martyr* is a loan word from the Greek that literally means “witness.”<sup>29</sup> The Greek word does not refer to someone who dies for their faith, it means “someone who testifies” or “someone who bears witness.” Many scholars have pointed out that

parts of the puzzle, but it can help to set the context in order to make sense of the final two chapters which inspire the section we are working on in this year’s Season of Prayer material.

Here is a brief, orienting sketch of Revelation’s bigger picture:

- Each of the seven churches receives a letter with an assessment of their faithfulness and each one receives the message: *Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.* (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22) The number, 7, is a symbol of completeness and God’s perfect way in Revelation. Listening to the Spirit is therefore important for the faithfulness of the church!
- History is controlled by God from the throne in heaven. Heaven is where things are seen as they really are and worship is the core activity of God’s people in every age to be able to see the world as God sees it. (chapters 4,5)
- The scroll with its seven seals holds the future, but only the Lion turned Lamb – who has conquered – can open the scroll. The Lion (representing strength and power) becomes the Lamb (representing weakness and vulnerability). This Lamb is none other than Jesus Christ, whose suffering, death and resurrection, rather than warfare, is the pathway for fighting evil both in the present and in the time to come. Christ’s very weakness and vulnerability is the power that has decisively overcome evil and death. (chapter 5)
- When the Lamb opens the seven seals (chapters 6-10), the story shifts to the earth, which has become the great cosmic battle arena between God and Satan. God’s side is comprised of God’s people and Jesus, the Lamb that was slain. Satan’s battle team includes the Dragon (Satan, chapter 12), the Sea Beast (the empire) and the Earth Beast (the priests and all the systems that support the empire, chapter 13).
- While it may seem like Satan is winning, Revelation jolts the church of every age to remember that we know the end result. The battle has already been won by Jesus Christ (the Lamb). The evil that continues to this day comprises the last, dying attempts of Satan who has been mortally wounded in Christ’s Lamb-like victory over death. Satan’s power is limited.
- The majority of Revelation focuses on the struggle on earth (chapters 6-20) in which the church is called to faithful witness. Even though many have speculated endlessly on the details of the end times from this biblical book, very little space is given to concerns about the ultimate destiny of humanity (chapter 20). Revelation is much more concerned with God’s sovereignty and with calling God’s people to an uncompromising allegiance to that sovereignty than it is with predicting the future.



### **So what does this mean for us?**

We live in a time of great change and uncertainty. On the one hand, the ever increasing changes in electronic and social media give us greater access to knowing and controlling our world. On the other hand, the economic upheavals of our world point to how inter-connected and vulnerable we can be. Where will *we* place our allegiance? Whom will *we* worship? These first century questions are critical for the church of the twenty-first century.

The closing chapters of Revelation reveal heaven and earth merging together in a new way: life as God means it to be! May this Season of Prayer material strengthen our ability as local congregations across Mennonite Church Canada to grasp this incredible vision and join the way of the Lamb so that God's design for community life (Rev. 21: 22-27) will be at the heart of how we live in our local and interconnected communities!

consistent resistance. Fine linen, white and pure, symbolizes “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8; cf. 19:14). With his challenge to keep their clothes on, John implies that failing to maintain one’s faithful witness to the end, or *not* resisting consistently and nonviolently, is as shameful as walking around naked – perhaps without realizing it (16:15).

#### **4. Blessed Are Those Invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:9)**

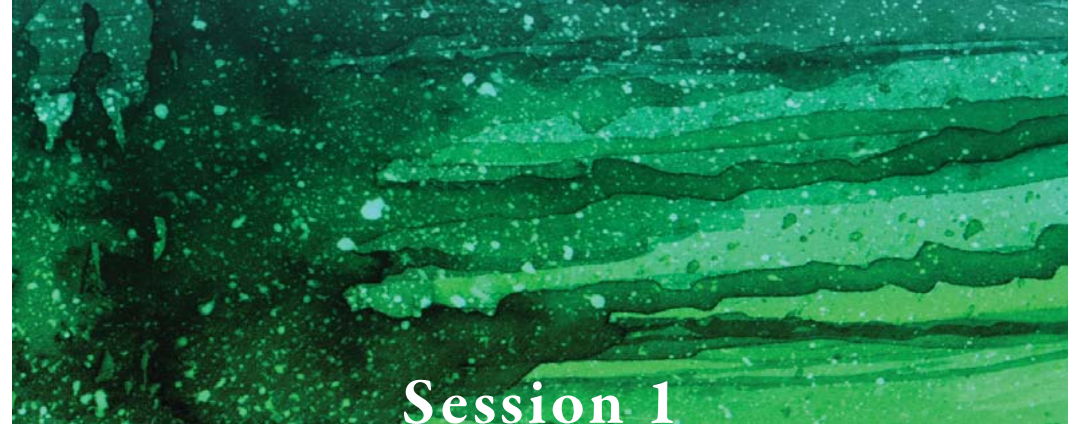
So who is invited to this reception? Certainly *everyone*. “Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” (5:13). Perhaps we can say more. Most of the passages imply that the blessing is intended for those who maintain their faithful witness, those who resist consistently, those who seal their resistant witness with their martyrdom. To make oneself ready as a bride for the Lamb means to die the martyr’s death and it is *only they* who will be granted to be clothed with that fine linen (19:8). Similarly, only those who are beheaded for their faith will reign with Christ 1,000 years (20:4). Read on for more about the troubling notion of victorious martyrdom.

Being invited to a wedding reception sounds great! Like receiving a blessing, who wouldn’t want to receive such a “blessed” invitation? One of Jesus’ dinner companions once said something like this, “Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (Luke 14:15). But Jesus responds with something like, “Not so fast! You may think that way, but many people will make up all sorts of excuses to get out from that blessing!” (cf. Luke 14:16-24).

#### **5. Blessed and Holy Are Those Who Share in the First Resurrection (20:6)**

Revelation speaks of a “first resurrection” (20:5-6) and a “second death” (2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8), but nowhere else in Scripture do we read specifically about a “first death” or a “second resurrection.” One might reasonably argue that the second death, which appears to refer to judgment or punishment, implies or requires a first death – a natural or physical death of some kind. Paul refers to death (i.e., the first death?) as an enemy of God that will ultimately be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:25-26).

One might also argue that referring to a resurrection as a “first” resurrection implies a second, though scholars are divided on this point. William G. T. Shedd is perhaps a typical spokesperson for the views of St. Augustine when he says, “The first death is physical, and the second is spiritual; the first resurrection is spiritual, and the second physical,” when all people will rise from the dead for judgment.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the matter is contested and discussions on whether these concepts support an “intermediate state” after death or whether one viewpoint on the above possibilities supports amillennialism, post-millennialism, or pre-millennialism, are extensive and theological commitments to one of these viewpoints can quickly colour one’s assessment.



## Session 1

# A New Heaven and a New Earth

### Core Scripture

<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:1-2).

### Supplementary Scripture

Isaiah 66:10-16, 22-23

### Visual

Find a globe of the world. The width, length, and height of the New Jerusalem is to be 1,500 miles (Rev. 21:16). Since 1,500 miles is about the distance between Vancouver, BC, and Thunder Bay, ON, or between Saskatoon, SK, and Montreal, QC, measure those distances on your globe and make a cube with sides that length out of construction paper and tape it to (or hold it next to) the globe. With more than 2.2 million square miles – actually 3.3 billion cubic miles – you can quickly see that the New Jerusalem would cover more than half of the land area of Canada! And it will be just as high! (Hopefully, this visual will also communicate that not all of the precise predictions in Revelation are to be taken literally.)

### Recommended songs:

HWB 14 *Come, we that love the Lord*

HWB 296 *Here from all nations*

HWB 299 *New Earth, heavens new*

HWB 323 *Beyond a dying sun*

better translated “consistent nonviolent resistance.” The consistent nonviolent resistance called for in Revelation is closely connected to being faithful to the end. Being faithful to the end is finally recognized, or sealed, in martyrdom. Thus, dying for one’s faith is seen as the ultimate victory in Revelation. It is what Antipas did (2:13). He was Jesus’ faithful witness because he maintained his consistent resistance until the end, all the way to his execution. It is what Jesus did, and it is what John wants his hearers to do (cf. 3:21). To endure by resisting consistently and non-violently, is to keep the commandments of God and to hold fast the faith of Jesus (14:12).

The second part of the interruption in chapter 14 spells out more specifically the connection between the consistent resistance John is calling for and martyrdom. “Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord” (14:13). The dead are blessed because they can now rest from their labours (14:13) and their time of resisting and suffering will come to a blessed end (not an *easy* end, but a *blessed* end). The reason for the blessing has its own warrant, “for their deeds follow them.” That is, the martyrdom of the dead will stand as an eternal witness that they resisted consistently and maintained their faithful witness. For John, a martyr’s death is the ultimate victory – and the ultimate blessing. While we might consider it a blessing and a victory to remain faithful until we die, who among us would consider the violent death of a martyr a blessing worth seeking?

### 3. Blessed Are Those Who Stay Awake and Keep Their Clothes On! (16:15)

The third blessing is not as challenging but it is definitely one of the odder ones. The blessing is pronounced on two types of actions: staying awake (or alert) and keeping one’s clothes on. The verb to “stay awake” (*grēgoreō*) is common to apocalyptic writings or speeches. For instance, it shows up in the apocalyptic speeches of Jesus in Matthew and Mark (Matt. 24:42-43; Mark 13:34-35, 37).

To be awake or alert is to be watching for what God is doing in the world. Being alert to what God is doing in the world may be the most underrated spiritual discipline. In the language of Revelation, to be sleeping is to be ignorant of or disinterested in what God is doing in the world, thus underscoring one of the tragedies related to how many people read the book of Revelation. *Many people today think of “staying awake” as being ready for the escape route that Jesus will provide at his second coming. In reality, staying awake means being alert to the opportunities of engagement with the world as one stays in tune with the Holy Spirit’s leading!*

The second part of the blessing in Greek is quite literally “those who keep their clothes on!” The NRSV finds a less shocking way of translating it. Keeping one’s clothes on is a matter of maintaining one’s faithful witness and one’s



HWB 611 *Soon and very soon*

HWB 646 *O Splendor of God's glory bright*

STJ 57 *Mayenziwe (Your will be done)*

## Introduction

The future is a multi-billion dollar business. Book publishers and movie makers rake in billions of dollars' worth of sales based on speculation – or confident predictions about – the future. Novels, sports, and much of life are interesting precisely because we *don't* know the future – and not knowing sparks our imaginations! In many cases, people have gambled and lost when their convictions about the future proved false. This happens for some when they invest in the stock markets. More recently, it happened for 60-year-old Robert Patrick, a Staten Island resident who spent his entire life savings of more than \$100,000 advertising in the New York subway system that the end of the world would come on May 21, 2011. After all, Harold Camping, an 89-year-old preacher and evangelist, had assured him of that date! What may be saddest about this picture is the number of Christians who, like Patrick and Camping, have misread Revelation over the centuries. So far, the most remarkable statistic about predictions of the end of the world is that all of them have been incorrect – a batting average of .000. But that does not seem to dissuade some preachers from predicting ... or followers from being inspired by the possibility.

In our congregations, Revelation has either become a hobby horse or has been totally avoided. Many preachers have not dared to preach on it. But it is part of the canon and we need to be in conversation with it, trying to figure out what it may have meant in century one and what it might mean for us today. As stated in the introduction, we understand that the primary prophetic message of Revelation is this: Wake up and be faithful to God in your current situation!

We have not tackled the whole book of Revelation in this study. This Revelation sampler, if you will, focuses on Revelation's vision of a new heaven and a new earth from the last chapters of the book. And rest assured, we have no intention of joining the business of forecasting the future because we don't understand prophecy primarily as being predictive of a series of events but as a declaration of a theological understanding of a given historical context in which a Roman Emperor expects to be worshiped as Lord.

Revelation presents an alternative imagination or vision, a fresh analysis of, and understanding of a critical situation. The key issue is – whom shall we worship? Why is this? Because the worship of another god (or other gods) is idolatry, the most basic sin in the Bible. Thinking that we can secure our own future,

The blessing falls on two or three recipients or groups of recipients. The first is the one who reads this prophecy aloud. It is not a general blessing on anyone who might pick up this book to read it since books did not become popular until years later. Furthermore, the verb used in the blessing means literally “read aloud,” not just “read.” The blessing is meant for the one who will run with the scroll to each of the seven churches – the same person who will read it aloud to each of the churches in turn. The order in which the seven churches are listed (in 1:11 and in Rev. 2–3) is a circuit, perhaps the shortest route that a runner could take to get to all seven of the churches. Imagine what impact it would have on you to take and read this letter to the members of seven churches who would hear it only once, and not receive a printed copy! The letter would literally live in and through you as you read and ran from one city to the next.

The second (and third?) recipient or group of recipients is “those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (1:3). John wants to bless the people in the seven churches for whom this book was intended – those who would be hearing the words recited by the runner. However, John also intends for his word to be “kept” or “observed.” There is an ethical message in this book to which John wants his hearers to respond. *The purpose of this book is not to give information, but to exhort.* We should remember this when we are tempted to ask questions like, “What is going to happen?” and “When?”

The first important thing for us to remember is that John wanted this book to be a *blessing* – both for the original messenger or runner, and for the original hearers of this book in the seven churches. Second, the book was written to urge the believers in Asia to respond to God in a certain way. If we are to read Revelation faithfully and respond to it appropriately, we need to look for that message and respond faithfully to what, or whom, it reveals.

## 2. Blessed Are the Dead Who Die in the Lord from Now On (14:13)

The second blessing does not come until Revelation 14:13, and it appears in an interesting context. In Revelation 14, we have one of the most disturbing scenes of judgment in the book of Revelation.<sup>26</sup> In the middle of a description of this judgment comes a short two-part interruption:

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.’ (Rev. 14:12-13)

In the direct appeal to the hearers of Revelation, “Here is a call for the *endurance* of the saints” (NRSV), the word for endurance (*hypomonē*) is

STJ 71 *Alleluia, the Great Storm is over*

STJ 73 *The Lord lift you up*

STS 93 *Alleluia! Give the glory*

STS 109 *Blessing and honor*

HWB 400 *Santo, santo, santo*

HWB 403 *The church of Christ in every age.*

HWB 409 *What does the Lord require*

HWB 413 *Faith of the martyrs*

HWB 417 *All who love and serve your city*

HWB 425 *Come, come ye saints*

### Introduction

The theme of this session is blessing. John (or Christ) pronounces seven blessings in this book. Seven is an important number in Revelation, which more than one commentator has concluded is not coincidental, even though it appears in six different chapters,<sup>25</sup> spread from the first to the last. Two of these blessings appear in the final chapter. John begins and ends his book with a desire to bless those to whom he is sending it. Each of these blessings tells us something important about the purpose and message of this book. And, like the rest of this book, these blessings are not for the faint of heart.

We generally think of “blessing” as a feel-good topic. Who doesn’t want to be blessed? The word *blessed* is tossed around freely today – perhaps too freely. Some people say that they “feel blessed” when they are feeling good, when things are going their way, or even when they have been particularly successful at being self-absorbed. But that is not the way that John uses the word. ***In fact, most, if not all, of the “blessings” in this book are directly or indirectly for those who die a martyr’s death.*** Martyrdom is a blessing?! Obviously, John intends for his hearers to think about “blessing” in a different way! How will his seven blessings impact the way we think about blessing in our context for faithfulness?

### 1. Blessed is the Reader, the Hearers, and the “Keepers” (1:3)

The first blessing comes near the beginning of the book. As part of the salutation, John says, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near” (1:3). It is easy to read over this and not think much about it, but this blessing is important for what it says about how to read this book.

as predictors of the end are doing, is an expression of idolatry. While there is wisdom in planning for the future (cf. Prov. 6:6-11; Luke 14:28-33), Jesus calls “foolish” anyone who thinks that they can secure their own financial future (cf. Luke 12:20). Still, it is tempting to think that one can. Indeed, if one could just know what the future holds – even with something as eternally meaningless as whether the stock market will go up or down, or who will win the Stanley Cup – one could become quite rich! The future is so important – yet unknowable – that people tend to pay attention to those who confidently claim to know something about it!

This leads us to a central conviction in the book of Revelation: ***The future belongs to God!*** This conviction has both positive and negative aspects. On the negative side, it means that the future does *not* belong to those who *seem* to be in power. Hallelujah! The governor of the Roman province of Asia (Rev. 1:4), in what would be today on the Western shore of Turkey, banished John to the island of Patmos “because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). On the positive side, it means that we can trust God to take care of us.

### Life for the Original Hearers of Revelation

Patmos is in the Aegean Sea, about 40 miles from Ephesus. John had been preaching the Word of God and talking about Jesus ... and had been banished to Patmos as a result. But why would such preaching have elicited such a harsh punishment? John doesn’t say. A brand new temple devoted to the honour (and worship!) of the Roman emperors was built in Ephesus in the 80s and dedicated between AD Sep 89 and AD Aug 90.<sup>1</sup> Roman imperial ideology held that it was Rome – or the Roman emperor – who had brought righteousness (*ius* in Latin or *dikaíosunē* in Greek), salvation (*sōtēria*), and peace (*eirēnē*) to all of the people of the earth. The temple proclaimed the emperor’s salvation both passively and actively. The emperor alone was saviour (*sōtēr*) of the world.<sup>2</sup> John would clearly have rejected this idolatry, for it is the Lord God Almighty who is king of the nations (Rev. 15:3; cf. Ps. 22:28), not the emperor! And it is Jesus, the Lamb, who is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14; 19:16)!

In preaching the word of God and testifying about Jesus, John had rejected Rome’s claim to sovereignty and had been banished as a result. It is unlikely that the believers in the seven cities of Asia for whom this book was written were being directly persecuted by the Roman emperor. Although numerous commentators on Revelation used to assume that this was the case, most today reject the notion. Nevertheless, there was certainly significant pressure from the local leading families, who could be seen as agents of the emperor, to honour the emperor. Neither the leading citizens nor the governor wanted to do anything that might be seen as disrespectful toward the emperor. On the contrary!

They were eager to do whatever they could to honour the emperor – even to the point of building an expensive temple and worshipping him – because they knew that honouring the emperor would ultimately bring honour and riches to themselves! The significant pressure to honour and worship the emperor probably came from neighbours and local rulers, rather than from Rome!

Sometimes we are tempted to think that life must have been so much different for the people for whom Revelation was originally written! In some ways it was. But in some important ways, it was not. These people were not a small, persecuted minority in the cross-hairs of the emperor's fury. Rather, they were regular people who had turned to God and had committed themselves to the way of Jesus ... and were simply trying to get on in the world. Many of them belonged to local trade guilds that mixed politics with the aims of their guild.<sup>3</sup> Often those politics involved some symbolic, seemingly innocuous act of worship offered for the emperor, akin to singing "God Save the Queen" – except that John did not think it was innocent or inconsequential: it was idolatrous!

Revelation comes alive when we simply accept what the text says in Revelation 1: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: ... 'Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea'" (vv. 4, 12). We know where these cities were and can visit the sites today in the western most part of Turkey. John probably wrote this apocalyptic-prophetic letter around AD 95, near the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian, who was assassinated in AD 96.<sup>4</sup> For an overview of what that means, see the opening section of this book, *Building the Framework*.

Philip Bender is a Mennonite Church Canada Witness worker in China. In his backgrounder to the Revelation theme of Assembly 2011, he wrote:

*The Book of Revelation was written to instruct and strengthen early Christians who were being compelled ... to compromise their commitment to Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Rather than a detailed scenario of future history, ready to be set in motion by a future event (e.g., the rapture), as popular prophecy makes it out to be, Revelation first addressed Christians in the mid-90s who were facing pressure to ... accommodate themselves to the wealth and power of Rome. ... We must not interpret the symbols of Revelation as forecasting specific phenomena in our own day, such as Russia, credit cards, radical Islam, the United Nations, etc. Rather, we must first ask, 'What would these vivid and puzzling symbols have meant for the first believers who first read this book?' Only then can we apply its message to our own time.*<sup>5</sup>



## Session 5

# Blessing

### Core Scriptures

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates (Rev. 22:14).

### Supplementary Scripture

Revelation 20:8-21

### Visual

Find or make a white robe. If a robe is not available, find some white cloth that one could imagine to be a robe. Display it beside a transparent chalice and decanter of red grape juice or wine.

As you introduce the visual to the participants, invite them to imagine making it even whiter by washing it in blood. Tell them that clothing plays an important role in Revelation. (It is mentioned or alluded to in 1:13; 3:4-5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 10:1; 11:3; 12:1; 15:6; 16:15; 17:4; 18:12, 16; 19:8, 13-16; and 22:14.) One of the more startling images associated with robes comes in 7:9-14, where John sees a great multitude – so large that no one could count – “robed in white.” When he asks one of the elders who they are, he answers, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). The idea of washing robes in blood to make them white is a bit jarring. What is going on here?

### Recommended songs

STJ 15 *Santo (Holy)*

STJ 81 *Take, O take me as I am*



thanking God for each of them, and let the gratitude grow in your soul.

3. Prayers of confession and petition: Reflect silently on the difficulties we – personally and as a community of faith – have in extending the wide and transforming grace of God to others. Offer the places and attitudes of exclusion or classism in your individual and congregational life as a confession, in phrases, or within the silence of your hearts. Conclude this part of the prayer time by praying STS 173.
4. Prayers of intercession: Widen the circle of your prayer by praying for openness to the grace and truth of God in the lives of your family members intimate circle of friends, congregation, denomination in Canada and globally, and the church in all its diversity and struggles. Finally, pray that Jesus, the gate for all of God's sheep, might be increasingly recognized and engaged by the society in which we live.

### Closing Litany

Close the prayer time with STJ 172, or use this adaptation of it:

“Hospitable God of open gates,

who is a gate for us through Jesus,

our shepherd and gate.

May we accept the transforming welcome

You extend to us,

So that, in turn, we may welcome others to your holy city.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Revelation is a wonderful and powerful text, written:

- to encourage the believers in Asia in their worship of God and in faithful discipleship,
- to reveal the work of Jesus Christ as the Lamb that was slain,
- to warn the inhabitants of the earth, through the believers to which it is being written to, about the judgment coming on all who would give their allegiance elsewhere, and
- to direct the worship and allegiance of God's people to their proper object: to God and to the Lamb.

***Revelation is at heart a critique of an empire and a reminder that the world is in God's hands.***

### New Jerusalem

The exact phrase “new Jerusalem” appears in the Bible only in Revelation. But the concept clearly comes from the prophets' expectation of the restoration of Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 2:1-5; 65:17-19; Jer. 31:38-40; Mic. 4:1-4). This vision of a restored Jerusalem – a *new* Jerusalem – is particularly striking in the third part of Isaiah, with numerous images borrowed by John in Revelation 21:

<sup>17</sup>For I am about to create *new heavens*

and a *new earth*;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.

<sup>18</sup>But be glad and rejoice forever

in what I am creating;

for I am about to create *Jerusalem* as a joy,

and its people as a delight.

<sup>19</sup>I will rejoice in Jerusalem,

and delight in my people;

***no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,***

or the cry of distress.

Jewish believers in the time of Jesus, or shortly before, often expressed their hope in God's restoration of all things *in terms of a renewed Jerusalem*. This is evident in some of the apocryphal books that were circulating among Jews in the time of Jesus. We see this in Tobit 13:16, “For Jerusalem will be built as his house for all ages. ... The gates of Jerusalem will be built with sapphire and emerald, and all your walls with precious stones. ... The streets of Jerusalem will be paved with ruby and with stones of Ophir.” We see similar expressions in the Testament of Dan 5:9-13. (The Protestant Christian Church has considered

Apocryphal books useful but not divinely inspired, but they are part of other Catholic and Orthodox Christian Canons, and appear as an insert in some of our Protestant Bibles.)

Even John's portrayal of God's people as God's bride is not new to Revelation. Isaiah 54:6 and 61:10 compare God's people to God's bride. John takes this image of God's people as bride and God's people as a restored Jerusalem further by combining the two somewhat disparate images. Whether he was the first to do so is not clear. The description of God's consummation of all things in 2 Esdras 10:25-44 combines the images of bride (or woman) and city in a way that is similar to what we see in Revelation 21: "The woman whom you saw is Zion, which you now behold as a city being built" (2 Esd. 10:44). This part of 2 Esdras was written by a Jew around the same time as Revelation was written.

What this means for us is not that we should expect to see a city more than half the size of Canada coming down out of the sky. We need to remember that John used ancient and then current Jewish visions and hopes and gave them a Christian interpretation. Rather, we should expect the renewal of all God's creation, with God's peoples (*peoples* is plural in the Greek text, unlike the Hebrew text being quoted; this is an inclusive vision) at the centre of it all – beautiful, renewed, redeemed, restored. God's dwelling (*skēnē*) is with the people. *Skēnē* is the same word used of the Tent of Meeting in the Old Testament and is related to the verb *dwelt* in v. 3, the same verb that appears in John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt [tent] among us." John's vision of the future is a vision of God in intimate relationship with God's peoples – with *all* the peoples of the world.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Consider the possible meanings of the dimensions of the new Jerusalem. Careful reading does not allow us to envision a geographical site with a city. What do you see as the implications of a vision for Jerusalem renewed in such a way that it fills the inhabited world? How might this relate to Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God or the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? Might John have wanted to communicate a poetic vision of God's will being done all over the whole world?
2. Locate Patmos and the seven cities of the Apocalypse on a map of Turkey (see <http://g.co/maps/wv28q> or see page 5). Ephesus is the modern Selçuk; Smyrna the modern Izmir; Pergamum the modern Bergama; Thyatira the modern Akhisar; Sardis the modern Sartmahmut; Philadelphia the modern Alaşehir; and ancient Laodicea is just north of the modern Denizli. If we

2. Many Christians believe that peace is God's will and that nonviolence – rather than a limited, "benevolent," measured violence – is the way to peace. Does a vital commitment to peace have any room for a God who judges, or who punishes? Why or why not?
3. One of the main expressions of a class mentality is the separation or segregation of people groups. One type of separation is the segregation in the U.S. between races on a Sunday morning. Another type of separation is in daily life between indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, primarily those of European ancestry. What expressions of classism have you seen in your community? Does John's vision of people "from every tribe and language and people and nation" being "a kingdom and priests serving our God" reigning on earth (Rev. 5:9-10) have anything to say about classism today? If so, what?
4. How does this session's theme connect with the "gated communities" in many of our cities whose gates are always closed unless someone with proper credentials (passwords, codes) opens them?
5. How do John's visions of the new Jerusalem with open Gates and as a place with no evil in it impact your understanding of heaven?

### Prayer

Reflecting on the open gates of the heavenly Jerusalem encourages us to acknowledge the presence of Jesus with open hearts and open hands. You may want to begin your time of prayer by reading the image-related text from John 10:7-9, and then place your hands in a palms up and open position. Sing, or listen to the song, STS 5 *Open my ears, open my eyes*. (It is track 3 on the 2007 Hymnal Masterworks CD, *Sing the Story*, Herald Press.) Allow God to fill you with an attitude of reverence and awe as you lead participants in this holy, preparatory activity.

1. Listening prayer: Become silent and listen to the scripture text with your heart. Hold the text gently, alongside of Jesus' statement in John 10, "I am the gate, whoever enters by me will be saved" and wait for it to speak into your reality.  
*"Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there."*
2. Prayers of gratitude: Express your gratitude for the openness of the new Jerusalem in John's vision of heaven. Thank God for the immensity of God's grace, and for the hope that evil will stop threatening God's people and God's creation one day. Think of all the ways in which God's accessibility is already blessing your family, community, and wider world. List these blessings,



In response to this disturbing vision of Jesus' triumph, Nicholas D. Kristof wrote in the *New York Times*:

*It's disconcerting to find ethnic cleansing celebrated as the height of piety. If a Muslim were to write an Islamic version of 'Glorious Appearing' and publish it in Saudi Arabia, jubilantly describing a massacre of millions of non-Muslims by God, we would have a fit. We have quite properly linked the fundamentalist religious tracts of Islam with the intolerance they nurture, and it's time to remove the motes from our own eyes. ... We should be embarrassed when our best-selling books gleefully celebrate religious intolerance and violence against infidels. That's not what America stands for, and I doubt that it's what God stands for.<sup>23</sup>*

Understandably, Tim LaHaye was not pleased with Kristof's words. But his rebuttal in the *New York Times* is itself remarkable – even shocking:

*Comparing my book Glorious Appearing to 'fundamentalist Islamic tracts' is a real stretch. The Islamic radicals who bomb the innocent are not nice people! ... Should Christ overlook their rebellion and welcome them into his kingdom? They would ruin it for everyone. You don't choose to live around people like that today; would you want to spend eternity with them?<sup>24</sup>*

It appears that Tim LaHaye expects heaven to be a “pearly gated community” designed to keep out the undesirables! I honestly do not know how God will judge the world. I do know that if Jesus comes back and wants to show mercy to all, I will not object! I am thankful that something so important is up to God and not me!

I believe that true love must have room for challenge and discipline. Nevertheless, I am offended by how exclusive and mean-spirited some Christians can be, *even in the name of love!* At the same time, I am encouraged by and deeply grateful for the inviting and encouraging spirit of love and joy that I have seen modeled by some church leaders – so much so that I want my own life and ministry to be radically inclusive and welcoming, and leave the judging up to God.

The proclamation of Revelation 21:25 is, “Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there.” Hallelujah!

### Questions for Reflection

1. One of the strategies of revivalist preachers and “evangelists” – both Mennonite and otherwise – in the last 300 years has been to scare people with hell badly enough in order to save them *from* hell. Is that what John is doing in the book of Revelation? Why or why not? What do you think of this strategy?

took the lives of the believers living there in the first century seriously, how would that impact our interpretation of the book of Revelation?

3. What fascinates us about the future? Why does it matter so much?
4. What difference does it make if the future truly belongs to God? Is trust in God realistic in today's world? How? Why? How is this related to biblical hope?
5. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul challenges believers to be discerning – Romans 12:1-2. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed. In century one, conformity meant worshipping the state/emperor. What does non-conformity mean for us today? What compromises do we make today in order to get along with neighbours and colleagues? Are these compromises good and fruitful? Do they contribute to peace (Rom. 12:18) ... or are they bad and unnecessary? Do they weaken one's worship and allegiance to God and to the Lamb (cf. Matt. 4:10; Rev. 19:10; 22:9)? How can Christians discern the difference?

### Prayer

Prayer is an ancient practice that grows out of realizing God is ultimately in control but delights in our joining with God's desires in prayer. As noted in the introduction, this study is offered to help us remember that the world, as well as the future, is in God's hands.

There are many ways of praying. These include: praying with Scripture, praying written heritage or contemporary prayers, praying spontaneous formulations that are free flowing or that follow a pattern, and the prayer of silent listening, or waiting on God. Whatever form or forms you choose to practice during these Season of Prayer sessions, be intentional about connecting with that inner place where we experience the nearness and goodness of God. It is when we become still and relinquish our own sense of control that we more easily remember and honour God and God's future.

You may find it helpful to dim the ceiling lights and light a Christ candle as one way of signalling this shift of focus from learning about, to entering into, an encounter with God. Alternatively, consider singing a song of devotion, such as STJ 57 *Mayenziwe (Your will be done)* and/or moving physically from one location to another. Whatever option you choose, allow God to fill you with an attitude of reverence and awe as you lead participants in this holy, preparatory activity. The times of prayer in this guide follow a predictable pattern beginning with praying with the text, to expressing gratitude and praise, to confession and personal petition, and finally to intercession for the church and the world.

1. Listening prayer: Become silent and listen to the scripture text with your heart. If any phrase stands out for you, stay with it, hold it gently and wait

for it to speak into your reality. When the Spirit nudges you, move on to other messages the text might hold for you, your congregation and our wider world.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup>And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:1-2).*

2. Prayers of gratitude that the world is in God's hands: Allow the "eyes of your heart" to imagine God's new heaven and new earth. Think of all the ways in which God's will is already being done in your family, community, and beyond. List these, thanking God for each one, and let the gratitude grow in your soul.
3. Prayers of confession and petition: Reflect on the difficulty we, personally and as a community of faith, have in basing our lives – our decisions, our practices, our relationships, our hopes, our expectations, our faith – on trust that the world is truly in God's hands. Use this list of difficulties, whether mental or written, as the basis for statements of confession, and then for expressing personal and corporate petitions. Or if you prefer, use Psalm 51 or another classic or legacy prayer of confession and petition.
4. Prayers of intercession: widen the circle of gratitude and intercession by praying for the circle of your family or intimate circle of friends, your congregation, denomination, in Canada and globally, the church in all its diversity and struggles, and finally for the social, political, and natural world in which we live and wait for God's full revelation.

#### **Closing Litany** (based on Rev. 21:3-4)

**Leader:** God will be at home with God's peoples.

**People:** Relationships will be restored.

**Leader:** God will be with us in person!

**People:** God will wipe every tear from our eyes. Hallelujah!

**Leader:** There will be no more death!

**People:** Hallelujah!

**Leader:** We will no longer see mourning, crying, or pain!

**People:** Hallelujah!

**Leader:** For the old struggles have come to an end!

**All:** Hallelujah! Come, Lord Jesus!

it helps to show that the Old Testament affirmations of the people of God are not emphasizing the exclusive *status* of God's people (e.g., *we* are God's people, *not you*). Rather, the emphasis is on the movement toward becoming the people of God. A proper relationship between God and God's people is marked by God's creation of *community*.

I have cited at some length where the prophets say, "they [or you] shall be my people" in order to show how common this image was as an expression of eschatological hope, especially in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. That is, being God's people is one of the primary images of restored humanity, it is what we are hoping for.

What is remarkable is that every time the phrase appears in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), the word *people* appears in the singular. This is true also of the other two places in the New Testament where one of these texts is quoted (2 Cor. 6:6; Heb. 8:10), but in Revelation 21:3, the word John uses is plural, *peoples*. This fits well with the emphasis on inclusivity – an expansive vision – that we see elsewhere in Revelation ("every tribe and language and people and nation" [5:9]).<sup>19</sup>

Revelation presents pictures in which the one sovereign and gracious God is finally victorious and restores all his creation to its intended blessedness, redeeming all his creatures. At the same time, John presents pictures that portray human beings as responsible for their decisions, pictures of how inexpressibly terrible it is to reject one's creator and live one's life in allegiance to false gods. While the faithful are saved, unbelievers are punished because they did not decide to accept God. M. Eugene Boring writes:

*By offering pictures of both unconditional/universal and conditional/limited salvation and thus affirming both poles of the dialectic, John, in accord with biblical theology in general, guards against the dangers inherent in a superficial 'consistency' obtained by affirming only one side of the issue. The interpreter's task is not to seek ways to reconcile the tension in the text; the task is to find the thrust of Revelation's message precisely in this tension."<sup>20</sup>*

#### **Keeping Out the "Undesirables"?**

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins concluded their wildly popular 12-volume series of novels on the end of the world (the *Left Behind* series) with the book, *Glorious Appearing*. In this book, Jesus returned triumphalistically, giving all the unfaithful their due. Flesh melted off bones, tens of thousands fell dead, and the living screamed in terror and ran around like lunatics. Jesus appeared "shining, magnificent, powerful, victorious"<sup>21</sup> in the midst of miles of carcasses. "And Jesus had killed them all, with mere words."<sup>22</sup>

I like the cautious judgment expressed by George R. Beasley-Murray:

Candour compels us to state that John has given no clear indication [that all will be a part of the new Jerusalem]. He simply presents stark alternatives before [humanity] of life for or against God in the here and now, and its consequences in the age to come. ... Without doubt John would have affirmed as readily as any that the last word on the ultimate destiny of [humans] remains with God, who has revealed [God]self in our Lord Jesus Christ, and whose grace and truth are equally present in [God's] judgment of [humans] as they were united in judgment of the cross. When we have stated all our arguments, we too finally have to rest in that acknowledgement.”<sup>16</sup>

In other words, all are welcome. There is a radical inclusivity in the book of Revelation – one that surprises in its hope that even God's enemies will be turned around to acknowledge and worship God ... and thus be incorporated into the redeemed people of God. The arms-open “reach” to include all of God's creation in that vision of redemption is wide indeed:

- You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God [people]<sup>17</sup> *from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.* (5:9-10)
- Then I heard *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing...* (5:13)
- After this I looked, and there was *a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying... (7:9-10)
- Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. *All nations will come and worship* before you, for your judgments have been revealed. (15:4)
- Behold, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his *peoples*, and God himself will be with them. (21:3)
- And the leaves of the tree are *for the healing of the nations.* (22:2)<sup>18</sup>

### People or Peoples?

In Revelation 21:3, John is probably quoting Ezekiel 37:27, though the general phrase and concept appear also in Exodus 6:7; Leviticus 24:7; 26:12; Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22 [without Greek equivalent]; 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 31:1; 32:38; 36:28; 37:23; Zechariah 8:8; 13:9. The actual phrase in Greek reads literally, “And you shall be [or, and they shall be] for me into a people,” however, the translation is awkward in English. Nevertheless,



## Session 2

# The Lamb

### Core Scriptures

<sup>12</sup>Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered. ... <sup>22</sup>I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup>And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Rev. 5:12a; 21:22-23)

### Supplementary Scripture

Ezekiel 40–47; Isaiah 2:1-5

### Visual

Find a variety of images portraying Jesus as lamb. Check your church library's collection of worship resources, banner and/or flannel graph collection, or go online to find the logo of the Moravian Church, (a conquering Lamb – see [www.gw.org/Btl/](http://www.gw.org/Btl/)). Create a collage that can be displayed to encourage participants to ponder on our different associations of Christ as The Lamb. Let participants know that you will reflect on these images together during the response time.

### Recommended songs

STJ 21 *Lamb of God*

STS 29 *Brightest and best*

STS 31 *Jesus, be the center*

STS 69 *Ya hamalaLah (O Lamb of God)*

HWB 146 *O Lamb of God all holy!*

HWB 153 *O Christ, the Lamb of God*

HWB 254 *Ah, holy Jesus*



### Introduction

Visions of the time when God will make all things right (eschatological consummation) are fairly common in late Second Temple Judaism.<sup>6</sup> It is understandable, since Jews considered Jerusalem the most important and holiest city in the world. The most important, holiest *place* in the holiest city was the Temple, while the holy of holies was the most important and holiest place in the Temple. Surprisingly, John's remarkable proclamation in Revelation is that the new Jerusalem *will have no Temple!* Why not? Because the holy of holies (which session 1 described as a perfect cube in shape) will expand to encompass the whole known world! The holy of holies symbolized the very presence of God. Only the high priest could enter it ... and even he could do so only once a year!

But God's project completion would be marked by God's holy presence filling the entire world! The whole world would be holy, sanctified. Who needs a Temple if God and the Lamb are ever-present? Just imagine if our holy sanctuaries would become superfluous because God were worshiped everywhere!

***The book of Revelation is the revelation of Jesus Christ.*** Whatever else we remember about the book of Revelation, we should remember it first and foremost as a revelation of *Jesus Christ*. How is Jesus revealed to us? Jesus is referred to as "Lamb" 28 times in the book, more than any other title, including *Jesus* or *Christ* or *Jesus Christ* or *Son of Man* or *Son of God* or *messiah*, etc. *Lamb* is the dominant image of Christ in this book.

Why? Because there is something about being a slaughtered lamb that communicates better than anything else who Jesus was and why he should be worshipped (cf. Rev. 5:9-10).

This leads us to another conviction central to the book of Revelation: ***The most important thing to know about Jesus is that he is a victorious, slaughtered Lamb.*** Jesus was *announced* as a lion – the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, (Rev. 5:5) – which drew upon messianic expectations of Israel's redeemer, based in part on Genesis 49:9-10. But what John actually sees is a *lamb*, standing as if it had been slaughtered (probably a reference to Jesus' death *and resurrection*). While the lion was traditionally a symbol for the messiah, the lamb certainly was not!

In fact, the switch from lion to lamb is – or should be – quite shocking! M. Eugene Boring rightly calls this

It is therefore remarkable that the 12 gates of the new Jerusalem will never be closed (21:25)! It would appear that there is no need to keep anyone out; all are welcome! Revelation 21:27 says, "But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." It does not say how this will happen. Presumably not because someone will encounter a closed gate. However, the point here is that those in the new Jerusalem need not fear contact with something that is unclean ... or someone who practices abomination or falsehood. The emphasis is on the *safety* of this "open" new Jerusalem, not the *exclusion* of those outside.

If this reading is on target, then the reason that the holy city (the new Jerusalem, the bride, the wife of the Lamb) has no gates is because *John sees no limitation to humanity's access to God.*

Some people have found it to be significant that the Bible portrays the beginning of creation in an idyllic garden-like setting, but the final consummation is portrayed in terms of a city that encompasses the known earth. We go from a garden paradise to a beautiful urban sprawl!

Paradise is not a shack in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, despite William Paul Young's inspirational book (*The Shack*), it is a city! One might expect a pressured, marginal minority to seek a great reversal in which only the faithful few are saved in some remote part of the universe, while the enemy receive their just reward (punishment) for unfaithfulness. John did not succumb to this temptation. The number of the redeemed is beyond count (7:9-17). The new Jerusalem is no tiny village in Timbuktu, it is a vast city as big as the inhabited world!

### Is John a Universalist?

Scholars have long debated whether John's theology is universalistic, that is, in the end, all will be saved.

Evidence both for and against can be found in Revelation. Richard Bauckham, Vernard Eller, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, W. J. Harrington, G. A. Krodel, Mathias Rissi, and Jeffrey Marshall Vogelgesang are among many who see John as a universalist here – or who lean toward this reading of Revelation. Grant Osborne, G. K. Beale, Robert H. Mounce, and most other Evangelical interpreters disagree.

Sometimes the book of Revelation is referred to incorrectly as "Revelations" (plural), as if it were a collection of multiple revelations. There *is* no book of Revelations in the Bible. It is true that the book boasts a variety of visions and auditions, but the word *revelation* appears only once in the book, where it is singular (Rev. 1:1).

## Thinking about “The End”

One of the helpful points that M. Eugene Boring makes in his commentary on Revelation is that we misread Revelation if we do not recognize that *its primary message – its burden – is to remind the hearers of Revelation about who God is and what that means about worship, both positively* (worship only God and the Lamb) *and negatively* (do not worship the Roman emperor or things that God has created). He says:

*John has already given remarkable expression to the Christian conviction that at the End we meet not an event but a Person .... All Revelation's statements about the 'End' are really statements about God; eschatology is an aspect of the doctrine of God. ... For John, God is not finally one 'item' in the new Jerusalem; God is himself the eschatological reality who embraces all things. In 21:3 a voice interprets the descending city as 'God's dwelling with humanity,' and declares that 'God himself will be with them' (cf. the closing lines of Ezekiel's description of the restored Jerusalem, 'The name of the city henceforth shall be "the Lord is there" [48:35]). ... In the only two instances in which the voice of God directly addresses the hearer-readers (21:6, cf. 1:8), God declares 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.' God does not merely bring the End, God is the End. [The new Jerusalem] is a holy of holies in which the divine presence is directly, intimately available (1 Kings 6:20; 2 Chron. 3:8–9). ... There is no temple in this city because God-as-defined-by-the-Lamb is himself the temple, the 'place' of the divine-human encounter (21:22). ... What awaits the believer and the world at the End of all things? John's first and last word is "God."<sup>4</sup>*

This means that when we read Revelation, some questions are much more fruitful and faithful to the text than others. For instance, the question, “What is going to happen? And when?” is not as useful a question as, “Who is really on the throne?” or “Who deserves our worship and allegiance?”

The “conversations” in which John engages with the Old Testament show that John accepts and affirms traditional expressions of hope and faith in God. John accepts and affirms traditional Jewish belief in the end times (eschatology) about a final consummation in which God makes things right and the whole earth will be drawn to the proper worship of God (and the Lamb!) in the (re) new(ed) Jerusalem. This is notably different from the belief common today that John is predicting or laying out a script for the end of the world.

## Gates as Security

According to *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, “the gate is a symbol of power (cf. Matt. 16:18), defence and safety (Isa. 28:6), and to ‘possess the gate’ is to capture the city (Gen. 22:17; 24:60).”<sup>15</sup> Gates were key features in the walls that protected a city from attack. They were necessary to allow a city's citizens and visitors to the city to enter and exit at will, yet they were normally closed at night and when a city was facing some danger from without.

“one of the most mind-wrenching and theologically pregnant transformations of imagery in literature.”<sup>7</sup> David Barr says, “A more complete reversal of value would be hard to imagine.”<sup>8</sup> And Donald Guthrie states; “there could hardly be a more striking or unexpected contrast.”<sup>9</sup>

## The Symbolism of the Lamb

From what image or type of Old Testament lamb does the symbolism of Jesus as the Lamb of God come? There are four primary candidates in the Old Testament, which are undoubtedly the most important and pervasive source for the images in the visions that John saw. These candidates are:

1. The Lambs of the Sacrificial System
2. The Passover Lamb of Exodus
3. The Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah 53:7
4. The Vulnerable Lambs of God's peace plan (eschatological peace)

## The Sacrificial Lamb

(Consider singing a song such as HWB 153 *O Christ, the Lamb of God* that stresses Christ as sacrificial lamb, before or after reflecting on this image.)

There is good reason to think of the lambs as the sacrificial system, considering the Lamb of Revelation was “slain” or “slaughtered” (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8). His death is expiatory; there are at least two references in Revelation to what the Lamb's blood has accomplished (1:5b-6; 5:9). Furthermore, there is an altar at the scene (6:9) and bowls of incense (5:8), which were features of the sacrificial system. When the Temple was still standing, one lamb was sacrificed every morning and another one every evening. This sacrifice was called the Tamid, and is explained in Exodus 29:38-39 and Numbers 28:3-4 (cf. also found in the ancient Jewish texts, Tamid in the Mishnah and in the Talmudim).<sup>10</sup>

There are also problems associating the lamb with a sacrificial system. The lamb was *not* the animal most naturally associated with sacrifice for sin. For that, the bull would have done much better. Furthermore, the terms used in Revelation are not those associated with expiatory sacrifice, but with violence (*sphazō* = slay = slaughter = kill, not “sacrifice”) and it is used equally for those who are killed (slaughtered) for their faith (cf. 6:4,9; 18:24). In John 3:12, Cain's “murder” of Abed

Expiation: dealing with the problem of sin; cleansing from sin.

Propitiation: rendering [God] favorable towards humankind; restoring right relationship.

One *expiates* a problem and *propitiates* a person. It is important to note that it is God who takes initiative, in Christ, to deal with sin itself, as well as the relationship broken by sin.



is also referred to as “sacrifice.” The word for lamb in Revelation (*arnion*) is associated (in the Greek translation of the Old Testament) with vulnerability. The most common Greek word for lamb in the Old Testament is *amnos*, which is the word usually associated with the sacrificial system but that word does not appear in Revelation. *Christ is portrayed as the first martyr in Revelation – one who went the distance in his faithfulness.* In his faithful witness, he was a model for the believers in Asia to emulate and his death was a model as well – the final seal on his faithful witness. Revelation’s lamb was not primarily a propitiatory or expiating sacrifice that atoned for the sins of the people.

**The Passover Lamb of Exodus**

(Consider singing a song such as HWB 262 *At the Lamb’s high feast* that stresses Christ as Passover lamb, before or after reflecting on this image.)

There is also reason to think about Jesus as the Passover lamb. After all, Paul calls Jesus “our Passover victim” in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Furthermore, the crucifixion of Jesus is associated with the killing of the Passover victim in all four gospels, and Revelation 15–16 is saturated with allusions to the Exodus.

On the other hand, while there are many allusions to the Exodus in Revelation, nowhere is the Passover itself mentioned. Although the Passover victim often was a lamb, it was not necessarily so; it could as well be a young goat (kid). Perhaps more importantly, the Greek word for Lamb in Revelation (*arnion*) is never used for the Passover victim in any of the surviving Greek literature in or outside of the Bible.

**The Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah 53:7**

(Consider singing a verse of HWB 254 *Ah, holy Jesus*, before or after reflecting on this image.)

Jesus’ life and ministry – and especially his crucifixion and death – have often been understood in terms of the suffering servant hymns of Isaiah (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13–53:12), and rightly so (cf. Matt. 27:12-14; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 8:32-35; 1 Pet. 2:23). Isaiah 53:7 says, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a sheep that is led to the slaughter, and like a lamb (*amnos*) that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”

There are difficulties here as well. Although Isaiah’s Suffering Servant is *compared* with a lamb in passing, he is never actually called a lamb. In other words, the lamb was not a symbol for the Suffering Servant, let alone a sustained symbol. Furthermore, the Suffering Servant theme is not taken up or developed anywhere in Revelation, which we would expect if the author had wanted us to think of Isaiah 53:7 in his use of the title, Lamb, for Jesus Christ.

witness. However, even scholars from previous generations recognized that the very act of reading and interpreting a text introduces a subjective element to “meaning.” As G. Irvin Lehman, long-time professor of Old Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, used to say, “Everyone thinks they take the Bible as it stands, when in reality, everyone takes the Bible as they understand it!”

A comparison of Isaiah 60 with Revelation 21 shows that some kind of conversation is going on here between the two texts. I have highlighted in bold italics some of the more striking parallels.

Isaiah 60	Revelation 21
<sup>1</sup> Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup> For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and <b><i>his glory will appear over you.</i></b> <sup>3</sup> <b><i>Nations shall come to your light,  and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ...</i></b> <sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms. <sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, <b><i>the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ...</i></b> <sup>10</sup> Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you; for in my wrath I struck you down, but in my favor I have had mercy on you. <sup>11</sup> Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession.	<sup>22</sup> I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup> And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, <b><i>for the glory of God is its light,</i></b> and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup> <b><i>The nations will walk by its light,  and the kings of the earth will  bring their glory into it.</i></b> <sup>25</sup> <b><i>Its gates will never be shut by day –  and there will be no night there.</i></b> <sup>26</sup> <b><i>People will bring into it the glory and  the honor of the nations.</i></b> <sup>27</sup> But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

## Introduction

When I was growing up, we never locked our house – at least not that I can remember. I don't even remember whether it was possible to lock our house. Did we even have locks? If so, did we have keys for them? We lived in the country and as far as I knew, none of our neighbours locked their houses either. What was the point? You just had to unlock it when you wanted in or out, and that was a waste of time.

Most of the people I know today never leave home without locking the doors to their house. I know of a few who still don't lock up, but the majority do. In part, we are living in a different time. In part, more of us are living in urban or suburban areas than was true 50 years ago.

The single, simple verse about the gates never being shut and there being no night in the New Jerusalem may seem strange and obscure – hardly worth thinking about for more than 30 seconds, but there may be more to it. The verse brings to the fore one of the great theological debates regarding Revelation: how inclusive is John's vision? Does John believe in universal salvation? That is, in the end, will everyone be saved?

## Isaiah 60

The sheer number of allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation is astounding. Some scholars have calculated that two-thirds or more of the verses in Revelation allude in some way to one or more passage(s) in the Old Testament. This high level of dependence on the Old Testament testifies to the theological and literary artistry of this book (whether the author of that artistry is John or the Holy Spirit!). It also tells us something about the nature of John's prophetic activity.

We need to be careful about how we interpret the relationship of Revelation and the Old Testament. Scholars have coined the term *intertextuality* to move beyond the older idea that the use of Old Testament texts in the New Testament represented a “transfer of meaning.”<sup>13</sup> A “transfer of meaning” approach held that (1) meaning was more or less stable, and (2) the influence was one-way. Thus, whatever meaning the older text(s) had, when deciphered could be applied to the newer text that quotes it or alludes to it. More recently, Biblical scholars have recognized that texts have multiple or shifting meanings, depending on who is doing the reading and under what circumstances. Furthermore, scholars now think about the “conversation” going on between older texts and newer texts. Newer texts with echoes of older texts also help us to read those older texts with new eyes, to see meanings in them that we had not seen previously. Hence the term *intertextuality*.

The concept of the many meanings (multivalence) of Scripture worries some people, since the concept seems to make the Bible less stable as an independent

## The Vulnerable Lambs of Eschatological Peace

(Consider singing a verse of HWB 408 *O day of peace*, before or after reflecting on this image.)

In several places in the Old Testament, God's project completion (or eschatological consummation) is portrayed as a time when the wolf will live with the lamb. It will be a time when the most vulnerable will fear no aggression from their natural predators. “The wolf shall live with the lamb (*arēn*), the leopard shall lie down with the kid [or goat], the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6). “The wolf and the lamb (*arēn*) shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; ... they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD” (Isa. 65:25).

The word for lamb used in these passages in Greek (*arēn*) is the word most closely related to the one used of Lamb in Revelation: *arnion*. The *only* word for Lamb in Revelation is *arnion*, the diminutive of *arēn*, both of which symbolize vulnerability in the Old Testament. Luke 10:1-3 says, “After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, ‘Behold, I am sending you out like lambs (*arēn*) into the midst of wolves.’” After Jesus' resurrection, we read in John that “when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs (*arnion*)’” (21:15).

This association has somewhat more to commend itself. Every time *arnion* appears in the Septuagint (the Greek Old Testament), it refers to a symbolic lamb and it communicates defencelessness (cf. Jer. 11:19; 50:45; Ps. 114:4, 6; and PsSol. 8:23; cf. also Isa. 40:11<sup>Aquila</sup>).<sup>11</sup> Revelation's Lamb conquers by faithfully submitting to death's violence, then rising from the dead.

On the other hand, Revelation's Lamb is anything but vulnerable. It is no cute little lambkin; it is a living, powerful, conquering Lamb! More problematic, the fact that it was “slaughtered” seems to destroy any sense of end time (eschatological) peace, since the whole point of the vulnerable lambs of end time (eschatological) peace in the Old Testament is that they need not fear being killed!

Nevertheless, the defencelessness of Jesus' faithful witness (and his “consistent resistance”<sup>12</sup>) is essential to that witness and to his martyrdom – a martyrdom that

PsoSol is an abbreviation for the Psalms of Solomon, which is part of the Pseudepigrapha—writings from the Old Testament period which did not make it into the biblical canon, but are nonetheless informative on numerous points of biblical and theological interpretation.



## Session 4

### Gates

John intends to inspire his readers' martyrdom. The *only* path to victory (or overcoming) in Revelation is the path of a defenceless, consistent witness – a faithful witness that is sealed in martyrdom, the ultimate victory.

Jesus is the faithful witness in Revelation (1:5; 3:14) just as Antipas was the faithful witness (2:13). Just as Jesus died for his witness, so did Antipas. However, Jesus was also the firstborn from the dead. He has the keys of death and of Hades (1:18), the key of David (3:7), and the key to the abyss (9:1; 20:1). In other words, ***Jesus' death and resurrection show his victory over the evil that put him to death.*** There can be no question about Jesus' authority in relation to that of earthly rulers, for Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth. The explicitly political language used about Jesus serves to invite the reader into Jesus' realm of victory and authority while undercutting civil religion as allegiance to the empire.

John suggests that although Jesus' own faithful witness led to his execution, his execution proved to be Jesus' victory over the powers of death. ***Furthermore, Jesus' own suffering/reigning/resisting victory turns out to be a way of being in the world – a model for believers.***

#### Christology and Ethics in Revelation

**Or: What difference does Jesus as the Lamb of God make for how Christians are to live?**

Christology, the branch of Christian theology relating to the person, nature, role of Christ, and ethics are closely related in Revelation. As Lamb, Jesus is a model for his followers' faithful witness. John expects their faithful witness to lead to their own martyrdom just as it did for Jesus. This book is not for the timid!

The ethical (practical) message of Revelation is this:

- Worship God and the Lamb.
- Resist the temptation to compromise your allegiance and to worship the emperor.
- Maintain your faithful witness to God and to the Lamb.
- You may die for doing so ... but your death will really be a victory.
- Don't worry, God remains on the Throne and is in control, working God's purpose out.
- In the end, we will enjoy the very presence of God and of the Lamb.

#### Questions for Reflection

1. What makes an image more appropriate or less appropriate as an image of Christ as lamb? Should the lamb have seven eyes and seven horns (cf. Rev. 5:6), which symbolize the all-knowing (omniscient) and all-powerful (omnipotent) aspects of Christ, or is that making Revelation's evocative

#### Core Scriptures

<sup>25</sup>Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there.

#### Supplementary Scripture

Isaiah 60:1-18

#### Visual

Project a collection of photographs of doors and gates onto a screen, or create a collage of printed images. If it is relevant to your context, include an image of a gated community. (Images of gates and doors of all shapes, designs, sizes, and materials are readily available on <http://images.google.com>. Type “doors and gates” once you arrive at the site.) As participants gather, encourage them to reflect on what gates and doors have in common. What are they used for? What do we know about the gates of the New Jerusalem? How many are there? What are they made of? Do they appear primarily functional or ornamental as described in Revelation 21 (vv. 12, 13, 15, 21, 25; cf. also 22:14)?

#### Recommended songs:

HWB 19 *Open now the gates of beauty*

HWB 186 *Fling wide the door, unbar the gate! (v. 1)*

HWB 220 *Worship the Lord in the beauty*

HWB 320 *Oh, holy city seen of John*

STS 92 *Sing with all the saints in glory*

STS 5 *Open my ears, open my eyes*



of darkness in your individual and congregational life as a confession in phrases or within the silence of your hearts. Conclude this part of the prayer time by singing or praying verse one of STS 92 *Sing with all the saints in glory*.

4. Prayers of intercession: Widen the circle of your prayer focus by praying for receptivity to the light of God in the lives of your family members, intimate circle of friends, congregation, denomination in Canada and globally, and the church in all its diversity and struggles. Finally, pray that the light of God might diffuse the darkness in the social, political and natural world in which we live.

### Closing Litany

God of light,

*Fan the flame of love in our hearts toward you,*

Illumine the darkness of ignorance in the world,

*Be the dawn to our nights of falsehood,*

Shine your light in and through us

*From the lowliest thing that lives*

To the Name that is highest of all.

**Amen**

(adapted from STJ 121)

You could also close the prayer time with HWB 673 or 802. Even though these are listed as a gathering and a funeral prayer, they lend themselves well to this session's theme and provide a suitable closing.

imagery too literalistic? In considering this question, you may want to look up the verses in Revelation where the word *lamb* occurs (in the Greek): 5:6, 8, 12, 13; 6:1, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1, 3. What characteristics of the Lamb do you think are important to capture visually and why? What have you visualized under the words "Lamb of God" before today? And now?

2. In some circles, it is common to think that the Lamb represents the character of Jesus in his first appearance, but in his Second Coming his character will be more like that of a lion. Where does Christ appear in Revelation as a lion? Do you think it is likely that the Jesus of the Second Coming will be *like* the Jesus of the Gospels ... or *different* from the Jesus of the Gospels? Why?
3. Study and meditate on the word *conquer* in Revelation. The word for victory in Greek is *nikē*, hence the name of the popular athletic shoe, Nike. The related verb for conquer is *nikaō*. It appears in 2:7, 11, 17, 26, 28 [English only]; 3:5, 12, 21; 5:5; 6:2; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7. Try to be precise: how are believers being asked to "conquer" in the book of Revelation? Is this like or unlike the victory of Christ?
4. What have been our usual ways of understanding the term, Lamb of God? Compare those understandings to John's use of the term. Make lists of the things that the Lamb has done and will do in Revelation. Looking for action words around the verses listed in question 1 will help with this task. Why do you think the emphasis of Revelation falls on what Christ *has already done* in the past rather than on what Christ *will do* in the future? Is the final conflict in Revelation 19 actually narrated? Why does the rider on the white horse (probably Jesus) show up in robes already sprinkled with (his own) blood? Could it be that the only victory that matters is the victory Jesus has already won with his death on the cross? Why is that?

## Prayer

When we reflect on Jesus as the Lamb of God, worship and prayer become a natural response. After stretching our minds with the challenging study of this topic, it is good to turn to prayer and stretch our hearts. As in session one, be intentional about connecting with that inner place where we find ourselves in the presence of the Lamb of God. Singing a song of devotion such as STS 31 *Jesus, be the centre* or Jonathon Larson's *We seek a City* to help you move into an attitude of prayer. Whatever option you choose, allow God to fill you with an attitude of reverence and awe as you lead participants in this holy, preparatory activity.

1. Listening prayer: Become silent and listen to the scripture text with your heart. If any phrase stands out for you, stay with it, hold it gently, and wait for it to speak into your reality. When the Spirit nudges you, move on to other messages the text might hold for you, your congregation, and our wider world.

<sup>12</sup>*Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered. ... <sup>22</sup>I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. <sup>23</sup>And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.* (Rev. 5:12a; 21:22-23)

2. Prayers of gratitude: Express your gratitude that Jesus is the Lamb of God, and that the Lamb is the lamp of the city of God. Allow the “eyes of your heart” to imagine the slaughtered, victorious, luminous Christ. Think of all the ways in which the spirit of our vulnerable, slaughtered victorious Lord is already present in your family, community, and beyond. List these, thanking God for each one, and let the gratitude grow in your soul.
3. Prayers of confession and petition: Reflect silently on the difficulties we – personally and as a community of faith – have in following and imitating the Lamb of God. Sing STJ 21 *Lamb of God* repeatedly, stopping to name (aloud or in your heart) a confession or petition before you sing it again. Conclude this part of the prayer time by praying the leader's words of assurance in STJ 131.
4. Prayers of intercession: widen the circle of your prayer focus by praying for receptivity to the activity of the Lamb of God in the lives of your family members or intimate circle of friends, your congregation, denomination, in Canada and globally, in the church in all its diversity and struggles, and finally for the social, political, and natural world in which we live. Then wait for Christ's final victory and the completion of God's saving project.

## Questions for Reflection

1. Think about the place and importance of light in your life. What difference does light make? In what ways do we take it for granted? What difference does it make in this vision if God and the Lamb are the only sources of light?
2. What difference does it make to you if the nations are invited into God's reign? Do you relate differently to an enemy than you do to someone who is a potential friend?
3. Think about Revelation 22:17 in light of the book as a whole. Do you think that the book of Revelation was intended for the thirsty? Why or why not? (Another look at chapter 2 as well as this one will help you reflect on this question.) How does it speak to our current thirsts?

## Prayer

As we reflect on divine glory and light in our lives, we are easily moved into an attitude of reverence and prayer. Stories of divine encounters are frequently associated with visions of light. If you have had such an encounter, bringing it to mind will help prepare you for this session's prayer time.

You may want to begin your time of prayer by focusing on the visual of many individual candles burning around the Christ candle, while singing a song of devotion such as STS 3 *Come, Light of the world* or STJ 5 *Come and be light for our eyes*. Allow God to fill you with an attitude of reverence and awe as you lead participants in this holy, preparatory activity.

1. Listening prayer: Become silent and listen to the scripture text with your heart. If any phrase stands out for you, stay with it, hold it gently, and wait for it to speak into your reality. When the Spirit nudges you, move on to other messages the text might hold for you, your congregation and our wider world.

<sup>23</sup>*And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup>The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.*

2. Prayers of gratitude: Express your gratitude that the Lamb of God is the lamp of the city of God. Allow the “eyes of your heart” to be illumined by acknowledging the presence of Christ. Think of all the ways in which God's glory and light is already present in your family, community, and beyond. List these, thanking God for each one, and let the gratitude grow in your soul.
3. Prayers of confession and petition: Reflect silently on the difficulties we, personally and as a community of faith, have in staying focused on the transforming, illuminating light of God. Offer the places and attitudes



The water of life is available now. No one need wait around for it. The missional invitation always proceeds out of an encounter with our Lord. The redeemed community is both inviting and invited, as it worships and follows Jesus.

### **Visions of God's Light and Glory**

That the New Jerusalem, the holy city, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb does not need a temple or sun or moon is also a reminder that *Revelation is not just a prediction of God's future or the end of time but also a proclamation of the potential of God's present!* Revelation proclaims the same faith and hope that are expressed in the Psalms:

Ps 72<sup>18</sup> Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,  
who alone does wondrous things.  
<sup>19</sup>Blessed be his glorious name forever;  
may his glory fill the whole earth.  
Amen and Amen.

It also proclaims the same sort of faith and hope that are expressed in the Lord's Prayer. In the Lord's Prayer, the first three petitions are essentially synonymous. They mean the same thing:

Hallowed be thy name  
Thy kingdom come  
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven

God's name is hallowed when God's kingdom, or reign, comes. And God's reign appears when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. And when God's will is done, God's name is hallowed and treated as holy. These petitions are all about God's reign *on earth ... now ...* not about some future consummation or future time. Essential to Jesus' preaching about God's reign is that it is breaking in already. It is already making a difference in experienced life, and is not simply or exclusively a future hope. These petitions are at the heart of the Lord's Prayer and at the heart of a Jesus-informed spirituality.

In a similar way, Revelation envisions heaven and earth as renewed, and the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to transform our present existence. It does *not* take us out of here to a heavenly one! If I am right about this, *it would mean that this book was actually relevant and useful for the persons John was told to write and send this book!* By extension, it also becomes relevant and useful for us, as the later recipients of its inspired wisdom.

### **Closing Litany** (Based on Rev. 5:9-14)

**Leader:** O Lamb, you are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,

**People:** for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

**Leader:** you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God,

**People:** and they will reign on earth.

**Leader:** Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered

**People:** to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!

**Leader:** Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

**People:** To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!

**Leader:** Amen!

**All:** And Amen!



## Session 3

# Light

### Core Scriptures

<sup>23</sup>And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. <sup>24</sup>The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

### Supplementary Scripture

Isaiah 42:5-9

### Visual

On top of shimmering (preferably fire retardant) cloth, place a large Christ candle, beside or just behind the favoured Lamb image from session 2. Place smaller tea lights around it so that there is at least one light per participant. As you sing the opening song, invite participants to come and light their light from the Christ Candle and to leave it nestled in the shimmering cloth, as a way of acknowledging the Lamb as our Lamp and the Glory of God as our light.

### Recommended songs

STJ 5 *Come and be light for our eyes*

STJ 54 *Longing for Light*

STJ 67 *Let there be light, Lord God*

STJ 116 *O joyous light of glory*

STS 3 *Come, Light of the world*

STS 10 *Come! Walk in the light*

HWB 216 *Christ, whose glory fills the skies*

multitude “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” says, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (vv. 9-10). The Lord God Almighty is “king of the nations” (15:3). God is not willing to destroy them. Rather, “All nations will come and worship before you” (15:4).

In the climax of Revelation:

21<sup>24</sup>“The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it [the new Jerusalem]. ... <sup>26</sup>People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. 22<sup>1</sup>Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup>through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; *and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

In the end, even God’s enemies are brought into the glory of the new Jerusalem ... and they bring their own glory into it as well.

### Revelation as Missional

Revelation is a missional book, which concludes with an invitation to come, drink freely, and enjoy life. The leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations! Victory will not come easily – “washing robes” in Revelation 22:14 probably refers to dying a martyr’s death (cf. 7:14) – but all are invited.

The shocking switch of perspective subtly inserted in Revelation 22:17 supports the missional nature of Revelation.

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.”

Here the Holy Spirit and the people of God join in extending an invitation to Jesus; “Come, Lord Jesus!”

And let everyone who hears say, “Come” [again, *come, Lord Jesus*].

Here the invitation is extended to “everyone who hears” (everyone within earshot of Revelation); “Come” [here too, *come, Lord Jesus*].

And let everyone who is thirsty come.

Here we are shocked with a twist. Suddenly it is not *Jesus* who is invited to come, but “*everyone who is thirsty*.” Why this sudden and unexpected shift of referents? Yes, Jesus will come, but the thirsty need not wait – they can come and drink now!

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

<sup>3</sup>For all the *nations* have drunk  
of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, ...  
<sup>23</sup>for your merchants were the magnates of the earth,  
and all *nations* were deceived by your sorcery. (Rev. 18:3, 23)

<sup>15</sup>From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the *nations*,  
and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury  
of the wrath of God the Almighty. (Rev. 19:15)

These passages emphasize the rebellious nature of the nations. All too often  
the nations have opposed God and God's people. It is with a sense of such  
opposition and even animosity that we read the famously messianic royal  
psalm, Psalm 2. This psalm was likely written to celebrate the coronation of  
a new king in Israel whom God addresses as "my son." After the end of the  
monarchy, the Psalm took on messianic significance:

<sup>1</sup>Why do the *nations* conspire,  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
<sup>2</sup>The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,  
<sup>3</sup>"Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
and cast their cords from us."  
<sup>4</sup>He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the LORD has them in derision. ...  
<sup>7</sup>I will tell of the decree of the LORD:  
He said to me, "You are my son;  
today I have begotten you.  
<sup>8</sup>Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
<sup>9</sup>You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. ...

But Revelation goes a step further. Besides being judged, these nations are also  
redeemed. Revelation is amazing for its expansive vision. John changes the  
singular *people* (in Jer. 24:7; 31:33; and Zech. 8:8) with the plural *peoples*. This  
is a rather significant change, because instead of this being a vision for God's  
people (as opposed to all the other peoples or nations of the earth), this is  
starting to look like a vision for all of the peoples that God created!

Revelation 5:9 appears to support this by saying, "You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for  
God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation." In Rev. 7 a great

HWB 591 *Lo, a gleam from yonder heaven*

HWB 646 *O Splendor of God's glory bright*

## Introduction

I have not yet read *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, by Mitch Albom. It  
was on the New York Times Bestseller list for almost two years running. More  
than 10,000,000 copies have been sold in at least 35 languages. I was offended  
with the title, since it seemed to me to be yet another syrupy sentimental  
projection of humanity's hopes, which, if taken far enough, becomes  
idolatrous. However, M. Eugene Boring's excellent commentary on Revelation  
has softened my critical spirit. Boring emphasizes that human language goes  
only so far in its ability to capture what John was seeing in his visions. If  
this is true in the book of Revelation, why should it not be true of Albom's  
book? After all, what kind of language *is* adequate to express what the perfect  
completion (consummation) of all history will look like?

Some traditional descriptions do not seem to inspire. For instance, will we  
spend all of our time singing and worshiping God? Wouldn't that get old after  
a while? It is hard for me to imagine endless worship as "paradise," even if the  
worship is above average! John does explain that it will be a place and a time  
when God and the Lamb will make their home among people (Rev. 21:3).  
Humanity's proper relationship with God will be restored ... but what will that  
relationship look like, exactly? And what will we talk about all that time?

## What Is Missing?

One way to approach the issue is to say what will *not* be present in the new  
Jerusalem. John does that in Revelation 21. In fact, the list in Revelation 21 of  
items that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, does *not* have is impressive:

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1. The sea (v. 1)       | 11. Sorcerers (v. 8)  |
| 2. Death (v. 4)         | 12. Idolaters (v. 8)  |
| 3. Mourning (v. 4)      | 13. Liars (v. 8)  |
| 4. Crying (v. 4)        | 14. A Temple (v. 22)  |
| 5. Pain (v. 4)          | 15. Sun (v. 23)   |
| 6. The cowardly (v. 8)  | 16. Moon (v. 23)  |
| 7. The faithless (v. 8) | 17. Night (v. 25)   |
| 8. The polluted (v. 8)  | 18. Anything unclean (v. 27)                                  |
| 9. Murderers (v. 8)     | 19. Anyone who practices abomination<br>or falsehood (v. 27). |
| 10. Fornicators (v. 8)  |   |



The point here is that it will be an attractive place to be!

Most of the “missing” items are negatives – the kinds of things that cause loss and heartache. Some of these “negatives” (e.g., death, mourning, crying, and pain) are obvious, as the normal hurts and losses of life, yet they are not God’s ultimate will for humanity. They are our inescapable companions, part of the human situation, but the new way of life in the new Jerusalem does not include them. Praise the Lord!

Some of the items Jerusalem does not have (e.g., the sea, night) appear to be either neutral or positive items so it is surprising that they are not present. What is wrong with the sea ... or even with the night? Sea (or *Yam* in Hebrew) was a rival god in near Eastern mythology. Yam was an important god of chaos and disorder in Canaanite mythology. In contrast to the chaotic and uncontrollable sea, God created the heavens and the earth in a peaceful and orderly way. In Canaanite mythology, Baal repeatedly puts down or defeats Yam, but in the final consummation God does away with Yam once and for all.

Somewhat similarly, Night (*Nyx* in Greek) was a dreadful figure in Greek mythology. Night was the fearful domain of demons and a time for magic. In John, night and darkness went together as symbols of ignorance and/or falsehood – the absence of God or even *hiding* from God. For instance, Nicodemus came to Jesus “by night” (John 3:2). In response to Nicodemus, Jesus said:

<sup>19</sup>This is the judgment, that the *light* has come into the world, and people loved *darkness* rather than *light* because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup>For all who do evil hate the *light* and do not come to the *light*, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the *light*, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (John 3:19-21)

Night is a time when there can be no work for God (John 9:4).

Three “missing” items (the Temple, the sun, and the moon) are so surprising for their absence that John feels compelled to explain why they will not be present and why they are not needed. “*Gar*” clauses are clauses that explain the reason for something, and two of them appear here. The first explains why there will be no temple in the city: It is because “its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (v. 22). The new Jerusalem will need no special place in which to worship God because the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb will be there in person! And because they will be there in person, there is no need for a special or holy place that symbolizes their presence! Some (all?) created things will no longer be necessary, given the presence of the Creator in

person! The sun and moon will not be present because the new Jerusalem will have alternative sources of light. “The glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (Rev. 21:23).

It seems likely that the statement has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, God and the Lamb will be present so radiantly that their very presence will provide all of the light that is needed. On the negative side, there may well be a critique here of “Sun” and “Moon” as rival gods. Deuteronomy 4:19 and 17:3 both contain prohibitions against worshipping the sun or the moon. The prohibition was relevant and necessary precisely because they *were* worshiped in the ancient Near East. Even the king Manasseh worshiped them, along with the planets and the stars (2 Kings 21:3-5; 2 Chron. 33:3-5), as did the Israelites (Isa. 47:13; Jer. 19:13; Ezek. 8:16; Zeph. 1:5; Job 31:26-27; Acts 7:42). So the Sea, the Night, the Sun, and the Moon may all be “missing” because God has done away with them as rival gods.

But John’s experiences on Patmos may also be in view here. We don’t know how long John had already been on Patmos when he received this revelation. It may have been years already! The sea was John’s prison guard. Patmos was a small island surrounded by water. From the central hills that housed the cave in which John traditionally was kept, one can see little but water all around. Night must have been very dark and oppressive there. In God’s future, neither will be present!

### What about the Nations?

Interestingly, the text adds that “the nations will walk by its light [i.e., the light of the glory of God], and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it” (v. 24). What is Revelation’s understanding of “the nations?” In biblical Greek, “the nations” and “the Gentiles” were expressed with the same words: *ta ethnē*. A number of passages provide some clues about how John understood the role of the nations:

<sup>26</sup>To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the *nations*; <sup>27</sup>to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered – <sup>28</sup>even as I also received authority from my Father. (Rev. 3:26-28)

<sup>2</sup>Do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the *nations*, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months. (Rev. 11:2)

<sup>17</sup>We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. <sup>18</sup>The *nations* raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth. (Rev. 11:17-18)