

Revelation

Introduction

Growing up, Revelation was not one of my favorite books of the Bible. I neither read it, nor heard sermons preached from it. Nor was I acquainted with charts of the "end times" events which are based, in large part, on Revelation. Except for "Worthy is the Lamb," the closing chorus of Handel's Messiah (based on Rev. 5), Revelation for me was a "closed book."

All that changed when I began to teach at Elim Bible Institute in Altona, Manitoba, and was assigned a course on Revelation. As I did my own study in preparation for teaching, the book quickly grew on me. I became caught up in its beauty, depth, and power.

And its *hopefulness*. I have found Revelation especially to be a book of *hope*—hope for those Jesus as Lord amidst suffering and who stand faithfully for trial, hope for those who yearn for the triumph of God's good and just purposes in a world where there is much evil.

Not everyone hears in the book of Revelation a word of hope. Some of my students at Elim (and in our churches today) were reluctant to study Revelation because of the terrors they thought it held. Some were put off from the book because of the speculations and distortions to which it often has been subject.

Yet as these students listened to the deep message of this book, many were grateful, even relieved, at what they found. They discovered not a word of doom and gloom, or a puzzle incapable of interpretation, but a message of encouragement, joy and hope in Christ. In short, they found the gospel.

Approaching Revelation

The goal of our Prayer Week meditations is to invite the book of Revelation to serve the purpose for which it was written: to "reveal" vital truths about God, Jesus, the church, and the world, so we may be inspired to greater hope in, and faithfulness to, the Jesus we claim as Lord and Savior.

How we approach Revelation greatly affects what we hear in it. While the intent of these Prayer Week studies is more devotional than scholarly, I believe we will best open our ears to the book's vital message if we keep in mind three principles of interpretation.

1. Time frame

People often assume Revelation only concerns the future. The visions are believed to describe a pre-determined sequence of events in world history—like a pre-recorded video tape set to begin when someone throws the switch.

In some interpretations, the church will not be on earth when these events occur. It will have been "raptured" to heaven. Technically called "dispensationalism," this way of reading Revelation must import from their original contexts other OT and NT scriptures to construct its scenario of the "end times." Many popular writers on prophecy approach Revelation with futurist or dispensationalist assumptions, and often claim to see the book's cryptic prophecies unfolding in today's political, economic, and technological developments.

There are other ways of understanding the period of time covered by the book of Revelation. Especially in the earliest centuries of the church, Revelation was understood as God's word to his people at a certain point in the past—the Roman Empire, in the AD 90s. In this approach, the imagery and symbols of Revelation (such as the beast and 666) are seen in persons, institutions and events in that day.

Many other believers, have seen in Revelation not just a word about the future or the past, but a message from God to his people in all times and places, especially when they are called to suffer.

The most adequate way for us to open our ears to Revelation's message is to be aware that **all** time frames are present. First of all, Revelation was a message to specific, concrete churches centuries ago (past). Second, it also portrays the coming final triumph of God's purposes (future). And third, it calls the church in all generations to faithfulness in the critical time of witness, testing and judgment between the cross and Christ's return (present).

Time frame of Revelation

(see manuscript)

2. Symbolism

Revelation contains vivid, sometimes bewildering, visions and symbols—beasts, seals, trumpets, scrolls, earthquakes, bowls of wrath, and the numbers 7, 12, and, of course, 666.

It is helpful to see Revelation's symbolism against the larger background of apocalyptic literature. "Apocalyptic" comes from a Greek word, *apokalypsis*, meaning "reveal," or "disclose." Rev. 1:1 reads, "*apokalypsis* "revelation" of Jesus Christ."

In the Old Testament (e.g. the second half of Daniel), apocalyptic was a type of Jewish writing that flourished in the inter-testamental period. This writing style makes generous use of visions and symbols to reveal vital truths about God and the world. These truths may not be readily apparent because of the suffering of God's people under the powers of evil.

Apocalyptic literature includes the following messages: the present age is dominated by evil powers, God's faithful people will suffer now, God will intervene at the end of history to judge the powers of evil and reward his faithful people with resurrection and life. John's visions in Revelation reflect many of these standard apocalyptic themes. In addition, John draws on the image of Jesus as the lamb that was slain.

3. Historical circumstances

Like all other New Testament books, Revelation was first written to a church in the past, facing specific challenges and needs. Some in its original audience were facing pressure, opposition, and persecution on account of their clear, consistent witness to Jesus as Lord.

It seems that John was written around AD 95, several years after Domitian became emperor of Rome. Under Domitian, worship of the emperor ("Caesar") as divine, gained momentum. Domitian demanded that he be called "Lord and God." He also ordered statues and portraits of himself to be set up in local temples throughout his realm. He organized a special priesthood to promote worship of himself.

Refusal to visit the local temple once a year, burn a pinch of incense before the image of Domitian, and say, "Caesar is Lord" was both a religious and political offense, and invited harassment and persecution.

Faced with this demand, Christians struggled with what to do. Should they renounce their faith in Jesus? Should they give in to the emperor's demands in order to keep the peace? Should they refuse to worship him and pay the price?

As Revelation opens, its author, John—perhaps the disciple of Jesus—is on the island of Patmos. Patmos was a prison for those charged with disloyalty to the Roman state. An early church tradition says that John, as elder of churches in Asia Minor, was imprisoned on Patmos for telling his brothers and sisters not to worship the emperor and his state.

In his prison cell, John receives a word from God for his churches as they face darkening clouds of persecution for their clear claim that Jesus alone is Lord.

We must keep these circumstances in mind when reading Revelation. While believers in any time and place can profit from the book's message, Christians who have suffered for their faith might be especially suited to find a blessed word in the book's many visions (1:3b).

Using This Resource

Most of these 5 devotionals are based on 2 chapters of Revelation. That's quite a lot of material to cover in a short time. Yet reading broadly can be beneficial for a Prayer Week exercise for two reasons: 1) it helps us find our way through much puzzling symbolism to grasp Revelation's broad, basic themes; and 2) it helps counter the speculation, sensationalism, and abuse from which Revelation often has suffered when certain texts are isolated from their larger context.

Group discussion might be enhanced by having members read the chapters ahead of time and reflect on the suggested "Preparation" questions. Hearing Revelation's message also might be helped by dividing the chapters into paragraphs, and having several persons read them aloud at the beginning of the session. (Quotations in this resource, unless otherwise noted, are from the NIV.)

Since Revelation originally would have been read in a worship setting, prayer and singing might also enrich the study. Some hymn suggestions are given for each session.

And since Revelation has been known to stimulate many questions and strong opinions, leaders might wish to supplement this resource with more extensive reading. Here are some suggestions:

Barclay, William. *The Book of Revelation. The Daily Study Bible.*

Toronto: G.R. Welch, 1976

Boring, M. Eugene. *Revelation. Interpretation Bible Commentary.*

Louisville: John Knox, 1989.

Ewert, David. *The Church Under Fire.* Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1988.

Grimsrud, Ted. *Triumph of the Lamb.* Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1987.

Metzger, Bruce M. *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation.*

Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.

Session 1

The Lord Among The Lampstands

Revelation 1

Preparation

Reflect on your own experience with the book of Revelation. How have you seen it used in preaching and teaching? Has it been the good news of Jesus Christ, blessing you as its hearer? Or has it been marginal in your faith development, perhaps even a "closed book?" What hopes and fears do you bring to this study?

What do you know about Christians and churches, in North American and around the world, that today suffer on account of their faith? (Anything you can learn about religious persecution today would be helpful for this study.)

Read Revelation chapter 1. What titles are given to Jesus? What is John's situation when he receives his vision? Who or what is the focus of this vision? What images and symbols describe this central figure? What mood or feelings does the vision arouse in you?

Commentary

Introduction (1:1-8).

In the opening verse, John identifies the subject of all the visions to come—not a time line of catastrophic events in a distant future, but a *person*, Jesus Christ.

The book of Revelation, first and foremost, is a revelation of *Jesus*. It is a disclosure of the impact his life, death and resurrection has had, is now having, and will have on the world and the church.

This revelation of Jesus is especially relevant to a church on the verge of suffering. He is the *faithful witness*, who remained obedient to God even when it led to the cross.

Jesus is also the *first-born of the dead*, who conquered evil and death through his resurrection. And he is the *ruler of the kings on earth*, now Lord over all earthly powers that work evil. This Jesus one day will be revealed as Lord of all for everyone to see.

The Vision (1:12-20).

Exiled to Patmos on account of his faith in Jesus, John sees a vision, whose centerpiece is "one like a son of man."

"Son of man" was the title Jesus preferred for himself (e.g. Mk. 8:31). In John's vision, Jesus is an exalted Son of man, clad in kingly robe and sash, displaying features of a judge, speaking the "the sound of many waters"—God's own voice (Ez. 43:23).

Jesus is a powerful, lordly Son of man, holding seven stars in his right hand. To Revelation's first readers, these stars would have represented all the spiritual powers governing the affairs of earth.

Along with the stars, Jesus also holds the keys of death and Hades. Having conquered death at the cross and resurrection, Jesus is now Lord of all powers that would destroy God's creation and would inflict suffering and death on his people.

But John does not see this exalted, powerful Jesus in the clouds of heaven in splendid isolation, high above the world. Rather, Jesus dwells in the midst of seven golden lampstands.

In apocalyptic symbolism, the number *seven* stands for wholeness and completion. In the Old Testament a lampstand is sometimes used as a symbol for God's people (e.g. Zech. 4:2).

Putting the symbols seven and *lampstand* together, we see a powerful, kingly Jesus who dwells in the midst of his church on earth. The exalted Lord of the universe is also an intimate friend, present with his people in the trials and tribulations they face in his name.

In this opening vision, then, we find the essential "good news" of Revelation: *Jesus is Lord, and dwells among the lampstands!* The remainder of the book will elaborate this basic message.

John: Pastor, Brother, Prophet.

In following the instructions of the heavenly voice to communicate the visions to his churches, John writes as a *pastor*, concerned for the physical and spiritual welfare of his brothers and sisters.

He also writes as a *brother*—as one who identifies with them in what they are being called to face. They shall face tribulation—a reality now, not just in the future; God's kingdom—which has dawned in Jesus; and patient endurance—the stance which the faithful church takes in the "end times" between Christ's cross and return (1:9).

John also writes as a *prophet* (1:3). He is not reading a crystal ball, predicting future events far removed from the lives of his people. Rather, John is a prophet who speaks to his people about what God has done, is doing, and will yet do in Christ, and what that divine activity means for their lives in their day.

The goal of God's message, given through his prophet John, is that Christ's kingdom of redeemed priests on earth (1:6) might both *hear* and *keep* (obey, live by) that word. In so doing, even now, in their time of trial, they will be "blessed" (1:3).

Revelation Then And Now

1. Summarize what this chapter teaches about the following: Jesus, the church, the powers of evil, the future, John. Say in a few words how the opening vision of Revelation is good news.
2. Bearing in mind their life situation, try to imagine what John's opening vision of Jesus might have meant to his first readers. How might this vision speak to Jesus' disciples today when they suffer? When they are not faced with immediate suffering?
3. Revelation 1 underscores that Jesus is present not just in the "hearts" of individual believers, but in their gathered community. Recall Jesus' own words, about being present

where "two or three" of his followers gather (Matt. 18:20). How might the symbolism of Jesus in the midst of the seven lampstands correct or expand our view of the church?

4. Note that the visions of Revelation are to be "kept" (or "obeyed" as in the NRSV), not speculated about. Paul says something similar to the Thessalonians whose speculations about the timing of the Lord's return divert them from discipleship (1 Th. 5:1-11). Does our preoccupation with the "end times" and the return of Christ ever deflect us from discipleship? How can Rev. 1 help us in our daily Christian living?

Hymn: "Rejoice, the Lord is King" MH 184, HWB 288

Session 2

The Spirit Speaks To The Seven Churches

Revelation 2-3

Preparation

Read chapters 2-3.

Note what praise, criticism, warning, and promise are given to each church. Can you discern an overall concern or theme in Christ's words to his churches?

Commentary

After an exalted vision of Jesus Christ (chapter 1), John gets back down to earth. With the power of the Spirit he turns to address seven churches. These were seven concrete, real-life congregations scattered in western Asian Minor (present-day Turkey). Each church had its own issues.

There is a pattern to the speeches. Each church is addressed by name. Then John describes Jesus, using features of the vision in chapter 1. A praise and a criticism are given, followed by a warning and a promise.

It is worth noting that before more visions are given, Jesus speaks plainly to his church on earth. He is concerned that people cast off their compromises and increase their faithfulness. Only then will they be able to "overcome" (2:7.) the severe trial of faith that already has begun, and which the coming visions will describe.

1. Ephesus (2:1-7)

The great commercial city of Ephesus included temples dedicated to the emperor and to the goddess Artemis. The coming of the gospel to Ephesus had aroused the merchandizers of Artemis to revolt (Acts 19:21-24).

The Ephesians are commended for their sound teaching, as shown in their resistance to the Nicolaitans. This Christian sect may have condoned immorality and accommodation to the world in the name of freedom from the law.

But zeal to weed out false teaching in Ephesus has bred a coldness in love. The Spirit warns these believers to return to that first love. Those who "overcome" will have life.

2. Smyrna (2:8-11)

Smyrna boasted of several magnificent temples made for the emperor. Believers here are both poor and rich. They have experienced harassment from local Jews, with more to come. (The real enemy, however, is Satan [v. 9]—a theme Revelation will develop later.) Yet they have stood firm in faith.

No warning is needed for this brave church. The Spirit only encourages continued perseverance in faith, and promises life.

3. Pergamum (2:12-17)

Pergamum was the first city in Asia to build a temple to Rome and the emperor (perhaps "Satan's throne" [v. 13]).

Some in this congregation are concerned for greater faithfulness. One member, Antipas, even has died for his faith. But others are succumbing to the false teaching of the Nicolaitans and the followers of "Balaam."

Since the original Balaam had helped lead Israel into idolatry (see Numbers 25:1-3, 31:16), these new Balaamites may have justified their worship of the emperor, saying, "We can worship *both* Christ *and* Caesar as Lord." They also may have encouraged Christians to participate in sacrificial meals at pagan shrines.

The Spirit sternly warns this church that its Lord will "fight against them" (v. 16) unless they repent. If they do repent, they will receive the "hidden manna" and "white stone" of life (v. 17).

4. Thyatira (2:18-29)

In this bustling commercial centre, trade guilds abounded. Often they would hold banquets in pagan temples. Christians in business would have faced pressure to take part in these guilds.

The church in Thyatira gets a mixed review. They can be commended for their love, faith, service, and patient endurance.

But a dangerous spirit of compromise with the world also is at work, which the Lord, through John, labels as "Jezebel." The original Jezebel tried to entice Israel to worship Baal along with Yahweh—and received severe judgment (1 Kings 16:31-33).

Whether in the form of a person or a teaching, this modern Jezebel is enticing believers to commit "immorality" and "adultery." Since these can be Old testament figures of speech for idolatry and apostasy, the Thyatirian Jezebel seems to highlight a new version of the old temptation for God's people to compromise their loyalty by assimilating other gods and their ways.

Those who yield to Jezebel face judgment. Those who repent and stand firm to the end for Jesus will reign with him. They will receive the morning star of life (2:26-28).

5. Sardis (3:1-6)

Though situated on a fortified hilltop, the ancient city of Sardis had the notoriety of being captured twice by invaders because its citizens failed to provide watchmen.

Except for an alert minority, a similar spiritual negligence lurks beneath the surface of this church. Outwardly, this congregation looks alive. But the risen Christ sees, behind their facade a church that is not only asleep, it is on the brink of death.

Hence the Lord's staccato admonitions—"Wake up! Strengthen! Remember! Obey! Repent!" (v. 2-3). Those who hear and revive themselves will wear the white garments of life.

6. Philadelphia (3:7-13)

A local synagogue seems to have been the source of harassment for this lowly but faithful church. Perhaps some members of the synagogue had been cast out for confessing Jesus as the Messiah.

Like Smyrna, Philadelphia receives only praise. These believers have patiently endured persecution. The assurance of an "open door" (v. 8) may mean that the gospel, to which they have witnessed at great cost, will yet bear fruit.

In this passage, the Lord's warning is directed toward the world. "Those who live on the earth" (v. 10) (which is Revelation's way of speaking about the enemies of Christ and his church) will soon experience judgement.

But the Philadelphian believers need not fear what lies ahead, for they will be spiritually secure.

7. Laodicea (3:14-22)

The prosperous city of Laodicea had two noteworthy features: a renowned eye ointment, and a spring of sickening, lukewarm water.

Here, material prosperity seems to have nourished an anemic faith. This church is spiritually "lukewarm"—a condition, Christ says, that is even worse than being "cold" (v. 15-16). Perhaps even more deadly is the Laodiceans' complacency with their condition. By thinking they are as well off spiritually as they are materially, members are blind to their impoverished, desperate state.

Here Christ's warning is the most severe and graphic of all the seven churches receive: He is ready to spew them out of his mouth.

But even to a church blind to the depths of its need, the Lord is gracious, patient, and inviting: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock" (v. 20).

Revelation Then And Now

1. In your own words, state briefly what has gone wrong in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. What would repentance in each congregation mean? Why are Smyrna and Philadelphia exempt from criticism?
2. Since the Spirit's words to the seven churches are really words to all churches in any age, consider the following.
 - a. Consider how our zeal for truth can become divisive and unloving? How can we balance concern for sound teaching and loving fellowship?
 - b. Do we subtly accommodate our faith to the political, economic, and moral pressures of our culture? If so, how? Do we sometimes think such accommodation is still being consistent with calling Jesus Lord?
 - c. Consider how our outward appearance of spiritual vigor and life may conceal an inner state of drowsiness and lethargy?

- d. When have we bravely stood for Christ amidst suffering?
 - e. When does our prosperity and satisfaction ever breed a lukewarmness we can barely acknowledge?
3. What words of assurance that Christ gives the seven churches are especially encouraging for you?
4. Note how often in these chapters the word "overcome" (RSV = "conquer") is found: 2:7, 11, 17, 16; 3:5, 12, 21. (The word also recurs in 5:5, 6:2, 11:7, 12:11, 13:7, 15:2, 17:14, 21:7. Of the 28 appearances of this verb in the New Testament, 17 are found in Revelation.) What does the frequency of this word suggest about what the first readers of Revelation were facing? Is there any sense in which the call to "overcome" is relevant today for us as Christians in North America? For churches in other parts of the world?

HYMNS: "O Jesus, Thou Art Standing" MH 227

"We Gather Together" HWB 17

Session 3

Sovereign God, Triumphant Lamb

Revelation 4-5

Preparation

Read chapters 4-5.

In chapter 4, what is at the centre of John's vision? What are the surrounding features? What is the primary activity of this scene?

In chapter 5, what is the problem? How is it solved? What is the surprise?

In both chapters, what do the many choruses of praise affirm about God and the Lamb?

Commentary

Several questions are driving the book of Revelation: Who is Lord? Caesar? Jesus? Some combination of both? Is God really in charge of the universe, when the human and spiritual powers that defy him seem so large? As John writes his visions from Patmos prison cell, the answers are clear.

From the point of view of earth, (i.e. not from the church) the emperor is clearly lord and god. Many in the world are bowing down before him; even the church is tempted to acknowledge his blasphemous claims.

But from the perspective of heaven—the true centre of reality—*another* God and Lord reign. Before this God and this Lord, all human lords pale in significance. Faithful people of God bring their worship and praise to the true God.

God Is Sovereign (4:1-11)

Caught up to heaven by the Spirit, John peers through an open door. He sees a throne, "with someone sitting on it" (v. 2), adorned with radiant jewels. Note the "revelation": above the world of false gods and lords, the true God reigns in majesty and splendor.

A rainbow hovers over God's throne. This is the sign of God's merciful covenant with creation given to Noah after the flood (Gen. 9:13). As many severe judgments against the powers of evil are about to pour forth from the throne (and which make Revelation a scary book for some), the rainbow reminds us that in spite of God's present judgment of evil, God still stands by the promise never again to destroy creation.

In front of the throne spreads a glassy, crystal-like sea. In Revelation, the sea is the reservoir of evil, out of which the beast will emerge (13:1). In the new heaven and earth the sea will vanish (21:1). The vision implies that evil, though real, lies inert and powerless in the presence of the sovereign God.

Symbolizing the created world, four living creatures flank God's throne. On their own thrones before it sit 24 elders, clad in white garments of victory. Since the number 12

stands for God's people, these elders may represent the faithful people of God under both the old and new covenant (12 + 12). They have "overcome" (chs. 2-3) the subtle and coercive pressures to give allegiance to worldly powers rather than the true God.

This picture of God as sovereign over creation pulsates with praise and worship. As the 4 living creatures ceaselessly sing their creator's praise, the 24 elders prostrate themselves before God's throne, and cry, "You are worthy, our Lord and God!" (4:11).

Recall that on earth, many are calling the emperor "a Worthy Lord and God." But in heaven—the compass point of orientation for the church on earth—the true God alone is worshipped by his faithful people.

The Lamb Reigns (5:1-14)

In God's right hand, John sees a tightly sealed scroll—God's plan for his creation. But there is a problem—no one can open the scroll and implement God's plan.

Understandably, John weeps.

All of a sudden John hears good news: a Lion has come to open the scroll. What John sees is not a mighty, conquering Lion, but its opposite—a Lamb, and a weak, slain Lamb at that!

Yet this Lamb does not lie dead. It stands, exuding remarkable knowledge and strength through its seven eyes and seven horns. Then the Lamb does something no other creature was able to do. It steps forth, and takes from God's hand the sealed scroll.

What a reversal! Not a strong, militant, conqueror-type/messiah takes charge of God's plan for creation, but a *lamb* marked by weakness, suffering and death.

Certainly we recognize this Lamb. In this dramatic switch of symbols from Lion to Lamb, John expresses the heart of the gospel. He "reveals" truths not readily apparent but so vital for a suffering church:

- through Jesus' servant life, death, and resurrection, God has broken the power of sin and death and has made him Lord of all;
- not the power and might of the world's emperors and armies guides the world towards its end, but a love so tough that it can withstand humiliation and death stands at the heart of the universe;
- the way of the cross is not defeat, but victory.

As in chapter 4, this fresh vision of the Lamb as Lord also is permeated by ecstatic praise. The 4 living creatures, the 24 elders, and countless angels exult that no human lord, but the *lamb alone*, is "worthy...to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (v. 12).

Even the creatures in the sea, that reservoir of evil, praise the Lamb! Here we have a glimpse of the closing vision of Revelation: one day, even Christ's fiercest antagonists will acclaim him as Lord.

To a church tempted to compromise loyalty to Christ, and about to suffer for its bold witness, John's visions present a strong challenge: Stand firm in faith! Endure suffering patiently! Strive to overcome! Jesus, whose name you carry, also suffered and died has triumphed! Your faithful witness to Jesus will be rewarded when he is revealed as Lord for all to see!

Revelation Then And Now

1. What moods or feelings do the visions in these chapters evoke in you?
2. What do these chapters teach about God? Christ? Creation? The task of God's people in the time between Christ's cross and his return? In your own words, what is the good news in these chapters? (Compare the scene in Revelation 5 with Paul's words about Christ in Philippians 2:5-11.)
3. Given what you know about their life situation, what do you think these chapters might have meant to Revelation's first readers?
4. Do you believe that human history is being guided toward a good end by a sovereign, loving God ruling through his servant Son? What in the world around us seems to deny this truth? How can we as Christ's people keep this truth alive?
5. In the early 1980s, when the threat of nuclear war hung heavy, a Christian friend of mine anxiously asked, "Why save money for the future? There won't be any future to save for. Why not just live day to day?" Can you identify with these sentiments? How can the visions of Revelation offer hope for living in a world in which the powers of evil seem so large?

HYMNS: "Holy, Holy, Holy" MH 1, HWB 120

"Crown Him with Many Crowns" MH 191, HWB 116

"Behold the Glories of the Lamb" MH 109

Option: Listening to "Worthy is the Lamb," the closing chorus of Handel's "Messiah," also would be fitting for this session.

Session 4

The Powers Of Evil Unmasked

Revelation 12-13

Preparation

Read chapters 12-13. Who are the main actors in these scenes? What do they do? What seems to be said about the church?

Commentary

Revelation 12 and 13 have been perhaps the most puzzling, sensationalized, and misunderstood chapters of the entire book.

Yet we must come to terms with these chapters, because the symbols of the dragon, the beasts, and 666 reveal vital truths about the faithful church on earth. The church must know about these if it is to "overcome" (chs. 2-3) its present time of testing.

The overarching theme of these chapters is the intense struggle between God and the powers of evil, in which the faithful church is now embroiled. Here John addresses several urgent questions of faith:

- why does the church suffer now?
- who or what is the real adversary of the church?
- how is the church to respond to its persecutors?

Let us consider chapters 12 and 13 as the first four scenes of a drama which continues into chapter 14.

The Woman And The Dragon (12:1-6)

The drama. In the heavens, John sees a woman, confronted by a powerful, multi-headed dragon.

As the woman gives birth, the dragon attempts to devour her male child. But the child escapes to God's throne, while God sustains the woman in the wilderness.

Reflection. Have we heard this story before? Recall Matthew's account of King Herod's attempt to kill the new-born Jesus. Recall also Mark's portrayal of Jesus as locked in combat with the powers of evil from the beginning of his public ministry—a struggle which climaxes at the cross and resurrection.

Though couched in dramatic symbolism, the story in this scene is familiar—it is the story of the gospel.

War In Heaven (12:7-17)

The drama. Michael, the guardian angel of God's people (Dan 10:13, 12:1), leads a fight against the dragon, now identified as the Devil and Satan (v. 9). The dragon is defeated—cast to earth.

The jubilant news is that, with the overthrow of the satanic dragon, God's kingdom has triumphed.

The somber warning is that this defeated dragon, knowing that "his time is short" (v. 12), launches a vengeful assault against the woman and especially her children, i.e. "those who keep the commandments of God, and bear testimony to Jesus (v. 17)."

Reflection. Please permit a personal anecdote which helps me connect with this scene. My grandmother used to raise chickens. As a child, I once watched her slaughter a fat, flapping hen. One swift *chop* with her hatchet sent this unlucky hen's head flying. After that blow, I expected the hen to fall down dead.

Not this hen. Rather, it *burst* to life, flying straight up into the air. Frightened, I also jumped in the air...and landed squarely on top of this headless bird.

Now this dead-but-still-alive hen really got mad. Instead of turning on my grandmother, its executioner, it bolted toward me, blood squirting from the slot where its head used to be.

Quaking with fear, I ran across the yard, with the vengeful hen surging at my heels. Only when I reached the other side did the hen accept the fact that it was dead and expire. But those few seconds between its death-blow and demise were fearful indeed.

In this drama, John reveals the deeper, behind-the-scenes truth about why the faithful church suffers now. While the emperor and his loyalists may be the fleshly opponents of Christians who confess only Jesus as Lord, their real enemy is a mortally-wounded spiritual dragon, Satan.

The good news is that Jesus—played by Michael in the drama—dealt a death blow to Satan at the cross. Hence Satan's days are numbered.

But Satan's "end times" also mean that he now has become especially dangerous. Unable to reach the one who conquered him, Satan now launches a bitter, last-ditch assault against those who faithfully bear his conqueror's name.

Christians, however, are not just passive, defenseless targets of the mortally-wounded Satan. They also contribute to his defeat by giving their lives in faithful witness to Jesus (v. 10-11).

Beast From The Sea (13:1-10)

The drama. The dragon calls a powerful multi-headed beast, with a blasphemous name and a healed head-wound to rise out of the sea.

This beast is the earthly stand-in for Satan, and the dragon gives it great authority and power.

From most of the earth, it evokes wonder and worship. But against the Lamb's people, who have not bowed down before it, the beast makes war.

Reflection. People have often identified their political or religious “enemies” as the beast depicted in Revelation. For example, Napoleon, the Pope, Russia, Henry Kissinger and Saddam Hussein have been identified as such

Let us try to understand this beast from the point of view of the first readers of Revelation. Recall that John, our author, writes from a Patmos prison cell. He is a casualty of the Roman state's warfare against those few who refuse to praise its emperor as divine.

John's first readers probably would have recognized this beast straight away—Domitian, the emperor, whose blasphemous lips speak the haughty title, "Lord and God."

But the symbolism of the beast from the sea is larger than Rome and Emperor Domitian. God's faithful people, both before (see the book of Daniel) and after, have suffered under political, economic, cultural, even religious rulers and powers that play God. These powers demand ultimate loyalty, and persecute those who resist. Like the mortal wound that seems to be healed (v. 3), the fall of one beast is followed by the rise of another.

While even more sinister incarnations of the defeated spiritual dragon may yet appear in human history, we must not limit our search for the beast to the future. Rather, Revelation warns that the beast, as the primary incarnation of a defeated Satan, is a permanent fixture of the whole "end times" between Christ's cross and return.

Beast From The Earth (13:11-18)

The drama. John now sees a second beast, this time arising from the earth. Though appearing innocent, even Christ-like, with its lamb's horns, its dragon's voice betrays its satanic nature.

Like a false prophet, the earth beast uses signs and wonders to deceive the world into idolatrously worshipping the beast of the sea.

On the right hand of its adherents, the earth beast issues a "mark"—a sign of ownership and identity. This mark is a counterfeit of the mark the Lamb's people bear (see 7:3; 14:1).

The mark seems to relate to the economic sphere of life, since "no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark" of this beast (v. 17).

Finally, this earth beast is identified by a number, which John emphasizes is a *human* number—666.

Reflection. I once had a student who, as a supermarket cashier, handed a receipt to a customer totalling \$6.66. The customer refused it, stating she did not want to carry the mark of the beast. The European Economic Community, credit cards, laser scanners, and much more have been alleged to signal the appearance of this earth beast today.

Again, let us ask how Revelation's first readers might have understood this imagery. Priests of the emperor could use ventriloquism and other trickery to inspire devotion to

him (perhaps alluded to in 13:13-15). Those who refused risked harassment and possible death (13:15b).

In addition, Roman coins bore the emperor's image and divine titles. Since buying and selling require money, the coins of everyday economic life may have been the original meaning of the "mark."

In the number 666, John's first readers likely understood a numerical code pointing squarely at the emperor. In that day, letters of the alphabet also doubled as numbers (like Roman numerals still do today). In Hebrew, the numerical value of the letters of the name "Nero Caesar" adds up to 666. Nero was an earlier emperor who persecuted the church, and Caesar was the title of all emperors. John's message seems to be that in Domitian, and the vast political, economic and religious system that uses deception and lies to sustain him, a *new*, more fearsome Nero has appeared.

But like the sea beast, the earth beast also is larger than Rome. Many rulers and empires since have used lies and other propaganda tactics to lure their citizens into uncritical loyalty. Patriotic songs, slogans, stories, ceremonies, pledges, rituals, and "righteous wars" cast the state and its leaders in a holy light, and can teach that unconditional devotion is a moral, indeed godly, duty.

During the rise of Nazi Germany, a forest of swastika flags surrounded the altar of Magdeburg Cathedral. The dean of the cathedral in 1933 declared, "The swastika flags that round the altar radiate hope—hope that the day is at last about to dawn."

I once taught in a school where, each morning, the students were required to gather before the flagpole and sing praises to the president of the country as, among other things, "Messiah" and "Savior."

Those who oppose and reject such teaching and rituals that deify the state and its leaders can be pressured, punished, and persecuted by the present-day beast. The students I taught could have been severely disciplined for not taking part in "patriotic duties."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a pastor in the resistance movement of the German Evangelical Church. When he critiqued the official state church's blessing of the Nazi regime by preaching, "The Church has only *one* altar, the altar of the Almighty...The Church has only *one* pulpit, and from the pulpit faith in God will be preached, and no other faith," he invited conflict with the German government. Bonhoeffer was hanged in the Flossenburg concentration camp in 1945. (Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* [Harper & Row, 1970]).

Remember a key "revelation" of Revelation 13: the beasts work primarily through *deception*. To the undiscerning eye, *they do not look like beasts!* Rather, to many they appear "holy," worthy of uncritical adoration and loyalty. Indeed, the dragon, sea beast, and earth beast make up an "evil trinity," a demonic imitation of the true God, Christ and Holy Spirit.

That is why the code 666, beyond a literal reference to Nero and Domitian of John's day, is also a fitting symbol of the beast's deceptive, "holy" character in any age.

The critical question Revelation asks is: will Christians discern the true nature of the worldly powers that now demand, on pain of punishment, their ultimate loyalty? Will Jesus' faithful people, "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (12:11), resist the human lords and powers who now blaspheme God, even if it means death?

Not only Revelation's first readers faced this painful, critical question. So have Christians in every age, no less our own.

Revelation Then And Now

1. Review what the dragon, sea beast, earth beast, mark on the right hand, and 666 would have meant to Revelation's first readers. How might these chapters have served to strengthen their witness? (Similar teachings to Revelation 12 can be found in Luke 10:18-19, John 12:31, Ephesians 1:20-21, Colossians 2:15.)
2. Many Christians believe Revelation teaches a future tribulation, from which the church will be exempt. However, Jesus predicted that his disciples would have "tribulation" in this world (John 16:33a, RSV). Do you believe that tribulation happens now to disciples of Jesus? How does Revelation restate this teaching of Jesus?
3. Jesus followed his warning of tribulation with the promise, "Take heart, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33b). How does Revelation encourage Christians to "take heart?"
4. Do you see any traces of the sea and earth beasts today? Can even "Christian nations" sometimes take on beastly qualities? Consider the following:
 - a. In Colombia, South America, the government attempts to close a Mennonite seminary that offers a program in non-violent peacemaking. Police investigate not only the seminary, but the Colombian Mennonite Church and its reconciliation program, Justapaz (*Mennonite Reporter*, Feb. 1, 1997 and later issues).
 - b. Among believers in North Vietnam have suffered beatings, fines, and jailings. One Christian leader was charged with "taking advantage of religion to break laws and distract people from productive work for the country" (*ChristianWeek*, May 10, 1994).
 - c. During the Gulf War, some school systems in Ohio tried to persuade children to support the war by encouraging teachers to put up flags and other patriotic symbols in their classrooms. A Mennonite teacher refused to put a flag in her classroom, and was ostracized by pro-war teachers (*Gospel Herald*, June 10, 1997).
5. How can we respect the governing authorities under which we live as God's servants (see Romans 13), and still give our ultimate loyalty to Jesus alone as Lord?
6. In his study of Revelation, *The Church Under Fire*, author David Ewert comments on the chorus of praise elicited by the defeat of Satan (12:10-12). "Such doxological singing helps the believer to lift himself up beyond his trying earthly circumstances into the presence of God. The church has come through the testings of history by singing." Would you agree? What songs of faith might be especially meaningful in facing the ordinary trials of life, and especially when followers of Jesus must suffer in his name?

HYMNS: "Alleluia! The Strife is O'er" MH 183, HWB 263

"Who Now Would Follow Christ" MH 344, HWB 535

Session 5

The Final Triumph

Revelation 19:11-22:5

Preparation

Read chapters 19:11-22:5.

What happens in each scene? What do these scenes reveal about how history will come out in the end?

Commentary

Will the defeated evil powers that still wage against Christ and his church ever come to an end? Will the victory of the Lamb at the cross, now known to his people by faith, ever be visible for all eyes to see? Will God's suffering people find reward for their patient endurance? Will God's justice and peace, which have dawned in Jesus, ever be fully realized?

These questions have been raised throughout the book of Revelation. Now in the closing chapters these questions will be answered as the broad themes in Revelation come to a climax.

Let us consider the grand finale of Revelation as another mini-drama in seven scenes.

Scene 1: The True Lord Reappears (19:11-16)

In heaven, Jesus suddenly appears, riding a white horse (symbolizing victory). Unlike the lying beast and false prophet of chapter 13, Jesus is "Faithful and True" (v. 11). Though a mighty king and righteous judge, Jesus' blood-spotted robe indicates that he is still the *crucified* Lamb who conquered by giving his life for the world's salvation.

In spite of the battle scenes that follow, this reappearing Lord is a *non-violent* Lord. His heavenly army carries no weapons. His battle sword is made not of steel but of his word.

Scene 2: The Last Battle (19:7-21)

As vultures gather to consume the enemies of God (a grisly counterpart to the joyful wedding supper of the Lamb in 19:10), the beast, false prophet, and their allies muster for battle against the reappearing Lord.

But *there is no battle!* Capitulating helplessly before the Lord, these antagonists are tossed like pebbles into the lake of fire.

Note the "revelation": when the world's true Lord reappears for all eyes to see, the powers of evil that now loom so large will be put away without effort.

Why no climactic battle at the end? John has already given his answer. Recall chapters 5 and 12: the decisive battle against evil and Satan has already been fought by Jesus at the cross. The end of history will simply reveal the victory that already belongs to the Lamb.

Scene 3: Satan Bound (20:1-3)

Now Satan is paralyzed at Christ's reappearance. In a flash, a subordinate angel seizes, binds, throws, locks, and seals him in a pit.

Again Revelation's amazing good news sounds through: at the end of history, the deceiver of the world will cower helplessly before the world's true Lord.

Scene 4: The Millenium (20:4-6)

Now, at long last, the faithful church receives its just due—*life!* The martyrs seem singled out for special attention. They rise first, and reign with Christ for 1,000 years. Then comes the resurrection of the rest of Christ's faithful people.

Neither those who literally shed their blood for their Lord, nor any other of the Lamb's faithful witnesses, need fear trial nor death now, for at the end, they all shall be raised to life.

In the 1,000-year reign of Christ and his church, we might see the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer, "Your Kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven."

Scene 5: Satan's Last Stand (20:7-10)

Satan is stubborn; he still refuses to accept defeat, and, with his spiritual allies Gog and Magog, once more tries to attack the church.

But a lightning bolt speedily cuts him down, and Satan and his forces are thrown into the lake of fire to join his earthly allies. The judgment of the "unholy trinity" is now complete. The dragon, sea beast, and earth beast that have blasphemed God, mocked Christ, and persecuted God's people have been defeated.

Scene 6: The Last Judgment (20:11-15)

Recall that in the time between Christ's cross and his return, the faithful church on earth faces the prospect of trial and unjust judgment on account of its claim that Jesus alone is Lord.

At the end of history, however, true justice will be done. God will judge, and judge rightly. Followers of both Lamb and beast gather before God's throne, where books are opened and deeds examined. Both grace and works figure in the last judgment.

The accent in this scene falls on those who relentlessly opposed the Lamb and his people. They receive their reward—the lake of fire, in which even death itself is consumed.

Scene 7: New Heaven And New Earth (21:1-22:5)

The goal of God's redemptive work is now reached—a "new heaven and earth" (v. 1). Gone is the sea—the reservoir of evil, the abode of the dragon and beast. Gone also are the tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain God's people endured in their long period of faithful witness to the Lamb.

Come is a new Jerusalem, resplendent in glory. The gates are open wide, yet offer security for its residents.

The tree-edged river of life running through the city suggests a new Eden, God's creation restored to its original purpose. This city has no temple, for its central feature is the unmediated presence of God himself.

This climactic scene of a new city and world indicate that God's saving activity in Christ embraces more than individual souls. God also seeks a redeemed world *community*, in which the righteousness, justice and peace of God fully dwell.

Revelation teaches that such a world is the end toward which history is moving. Only God knows the day it shall come. Until it does, God's people are called to a life of faithful witness to Jesus as Lord—faith which, during this time of evil, takes on the quality of "patient endurance" (1:9, 13:10).

Yet the victory of Christ at the cross guarantees that such a world *will* come—indeed, that it already has begun to dawn. Hence the saints in all generations, until the end comes in full, unite in their prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus" (22:20).

Revelation Then And Now

1. Though these chapters contain many puzzling details, try to focus on the main themes, on the "who" and "what," rather than the "how, when, where." What do these chapters teach about Christ, the church, judgment, the powers of evil, the end of history, hope? What is the good news of these chapters?
2. Try to imagine what these chapters might mean to a church that is paying a price for its faith.
3. What specific kinds of sin and evil do you believe will *not* be present in the New Jerusalem? What positive qualities *will* be present? How does John's vision of the new heaven and earth at the end strengthen your faith?
4. In light of the end of Revelation, how should Christians live now? Should they be passive, arguing, "It will all come out right for me in the end, so I'll just keep myself pure and wait for Christ's return?" Or should they live aggressively, using any means to fight evil and help God's final kingdom come? Or, another way? How has the church in Revelation been urged to live amidst the powers of this world until the Lord reappears?
5. Unlike the first readers of Revelation, many of us in North America are not facing overt persecution for our faith. How has this study helped you think of ways in which suffering for faith might be more subtle? Has it helped you become more empathetic toward those Christians who are paying a larger price than we are for being Christian?

HYMNS: "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" MH 95, 601; HWB 106, 285

"Come We That Love the Lord" MH 529, HWB 14

"Wake the Song of Jubilee" MH 199