



REVELATION

More than conquerors

10 Studies for Group or Personal Use

Term 2 2021



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This study is adapted from *Revelation: Heaven’s Perspective* (The Good Book Company, 2019) by Tim Chester, and *Revelation: The Vision Statement* (Matthias Media, 2003) by Greg Clarke.

Series Overview

Revelation is a part of the Bible that seems so fantastical and other-worldly that people tend to give it a wide berth. However, the last book of the Bible has a magnificent and deeply relevant message. And, provided we have the keys to its interpretation, it's not quite so difficult to understand as we might first think.

Author & Date

Four times the author identifies himself as 'John' (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). From the early second century A.D. it has been held that this John was the apostle: one of Jesus' first disciples – the son of Zebedee and brother of James (Matt 4:21). The book itself reveals that the author was a Jew, well-versed in Scripture (i.e. the Old Testament), and a church leader who was well known to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

Some dispute that John the apostle is the author, and that it was another church leader named John. Their main argument is that the writing style of Revelation is markedly different to the apostle's other known work. However, the external evidence seems overwhelmingly supportive of the traditional view.

Historical Situation & Purpose

Revelation was written when Christians were entering a time of persecution. The two periods most often mentioned are the latter part of Nero's reign (A.D. 54–68) and the latter part of Domitian's reign (81–96). Most scholars date the book c.95 A.D.

As the Christian church had increased throughout the Middle East and Asia, persecution had also increased. Christians who held back from participating in the patriotic Roman religious practices of the day were seen as *disloyal citizens* – as *destabilising* to society. This was especially so when it came to *the cult of emperor worship* – treating the emperor like a god. Christians could not do this. And as the cult of the emperor grew, so did the hostility towards and persecution of Christians. This reached its most extreme under the reign of the emperor Domitian, who explicitly demanded to be worshipped as a god.



And so John writes to encourage the faithful to remain faithful – to resist staunchly the demands of emperor worship and the temptations of decadent Roman society. He does this by informing his readers that though Satan will increase his persecution of believers, he has already been ultimately defeated at the cross. This means that they are sealed against any spiritual harm and will be vindicated when Christ returns. This gives them *every reason to trust God*, and to stand fast – even to death.

Genre of the Book

Revelation is ‘apocalyptic literature’ – a kind of writing that is highly symbolic. It’s about revealing a ‘big picture’ of God and his work. Although its visions often seem bizarre to us, fortunately the book provides a number of clues for its own interpretation (e.g. stars are angels, lampstands are churches, etc.). The vivid imagery is accompanied by a symbolic use of numbers, such as the number 7, which stands for *completeness*.

An important principle to remember about apocalyptic images is that *they speak truly and accurately, but not precisely*. As such it’s wrong to press apocalyptic imagery in its details, and interpret it too finely.

Themes

The themes of Revelation are many and multi-faceted. As already mentioned there is a constant call throughout the book to be faithful in the midst of trying circumstances. There is a significant focus on justice and judgement, and on God’s ultimately making everything right. A key part of this is the depiction of Satan, and God’s defeat and destruction of him along with all evil.

However, perhaps the most central theme of Revelation is the *already-completed* victory of Jesus. The great end-time battle doesn’t lie in the future, it lies in the past – in the historic death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ *has* conquered the evils of sin, guilt and death, and the power that stand behind them. As a consequence, Christ reigns *in all his glory* (1:12–18; 5:6–10; 19:11–16), and God’s kingdom is now a *present reality* – one we’re a part of. Without understanding the centrality of this theme – the conquering Christ – the meaning of Revelation will not be unlocked.

Interpretations

Interpreters of Revelation have historically fallen into four main groups:

Preterists understand the book exclusively in terms of its first-century setting, claiming that most of its events have already taken place. However, this view has the demerit of making Revelation meaningless for all subsequent readers.

Historicists take it as an inspired forecast of the whole of human history. But if this were so, the early Christians could not have got much out of a book whose content was basically for later periods.

Futurists hold that, apart from the first few chapters, the book is exclusively concerned with happenings at the end of the age. They see the seven seals and all the rest as prefiguring those events which will usher in the second coming of Christ. Until those days come, however, Revelation means little for the intermediate generations, except that God has an ultimate purpose.

Idealists view it as symbolic pictures of timeless truths as the victory of good over evil. This secures its relevance for all periods of the church's history. But the refusal of this view to see any firm historical anchorage seems dubious to say the least.

It seems that elements from more than one of these views are required for a satisfactory understanding of Revelation.

Four Keys to Revelation (cf. Paul Barnett, *Apocalypse Now and Then*)

1. Crack the Code. John uses symbols (images, numbers) that carry meaning. Our task is to think what these symbols mean in each episode as it comes before us.

2. Learn the layout. Revelation is a series of layered visions – often different 'angles' on the one event (i.e not necessarily consecutive, chronological events).

3. Perceive the Parallelism. John also engages in an audacious parodying of Romans society, which he sets in 'negative parallel' to the gospel (e.g. the New Jerusalem surpassing by far Babylon the Great).

4. Centre on Christ. As mentioned above, the already-completed victory of Christ, in his death and resurrection, is the true centre of Revelation.



Symbols in Revelation

7: completeness or perfection
(perhaps from the seven days of creation)

6: incompleteness or imperfection
(one less than seven)

Seven spirits or sevenfold Spirit: the ever-present Spirit of God (seven signifying his complete or perfect presence)

4: everything, geographic completeness (e.g. the four corners of the earth)

12: completeness for God's people (from the 12 patriarchs/tribes of the Old Testament and the 12 apostles of the New Testament).

1000: many

144,000: $12 \times 12 \times 1000 =$
completeness \times many = all God's many people

Horn: strength

Eyes: sight or wisdom (insight)

Sea: the forces of chaos (so a crystal sea represents complete control over the forces of chaos)

Living creatures: power or imperial power

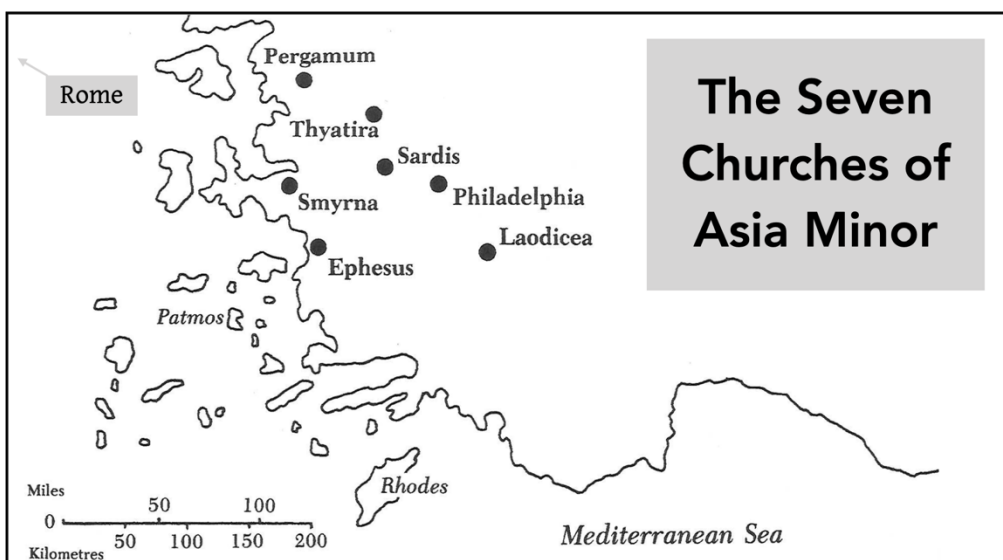
White robes: God's declaration of the wearer's purity, righteousness and vindication – and therefore also the right to be in God's presence

Rainbow: covenant faithfulness and mercy (from Noah's rainbow)

Virginity: Faithfulness to God (ready for the marriage to the Lamb)

Adultery: unfaithfulness to God

Trumpets: warning/announcements of judgement, victory, or battle.



STUDY 1 | Behold Your King *Revelation 1*

1. From your previous knowledge of Revelation, how might you summarise its message to a Christian friend, or to someone who's not a Christian?

READ | Revelation 1:1-8

2. What is this a revelation of (cf. v.1; see also v.19)?

3. Consider vv.1-2 for a moment. What is the '5 link chain' of revelation that has led to your reading it now.

4. According to vv.3-4, what will be the result of our reading this book? How do vv.5-8 fill out our understanding of what this means?

- How does this encourage you?

READ | Revelation 1:9-20

5. What is the situation faced by John and the churches to whom he is writing?



As mentioned in the Series Overview, apocalyptic literature uses a system of symbols to communicate truths about God powerfully. Here, 'the seven spirits before his throne' (1:4) is simply a description of the Holy Spirit (it could also be translated 'the sevenfold spirit'). Seven is the number of perfection or completeness. It is telling us that the Spirit of God is all-present and all-seeing - he is everywhere and sees everything.

6. Given what we know about the number seven, what might be the significance of the churches listed in v.11?

7. In v.13 John describes seeing 'One like the Son of Man'. Consider the striking imagery used to describe him (vv.13-16), as well as his self-description (vv.17-18). Who do you think this figure is, and why?

8. Where is the figure that John sees? What is the significance of that (cf. v.20)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. What opposition or pressure do you and your church face today?

10. Consider John's response when he sees Jesus (v.17). Is it appropriate? Why/why not?

- How might John's response be a challenge to you?
- In what way is Jesus' response to John so encouraging for him - and us?

STUDY 2 | Keeping Your First Love Your First Love *Revelation 2*

1. "What is the biggest problem with the church?" How might people in the street answer that question in general?

READ | Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

2. These are the opening verses of each letter. What do you notice about their descriptions of the one who is speaking?

The 7 churches who receive 'letters' from Jesus in chapters 2 and 3 are the 7 churches listed in 1:11. While undoubtedly having some connection to 7 real churches/congregations, they also symbolise the whole of the church. As such, there are patterns and commonalities across each church, while also distinctives. In this study we'll focus on the churches in chapter 2 (i.e. the first 4 churches).

READ | Revelation 2:1-29

4. Fill out the table on the next page for the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira.



	Ephesus	Smyrna	Pergamum	Thyatira
Who is speaking (i.e. what self-description is used)?				
What does he commend?				
What is his complaint?				
What is his command?				
What promise is given?				

5. What are some common encouragements Jesus gives to these churches? What are some common rebukes?

6. Have a think about our own church. What might Jesus' encouragement to Minchinbury Anglican look like today? What might he call us to repent of as a church?

7. The letter to the church in Smyrna stands out - there is no rebuke given to them. What three pressures do these faithful Christians face, and what three corresponding encouragements does the Spirit give them (cf. vv.9-10)?

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- Imagine you're in the church at Smyrna. Would this letter be an encouragement to you? Why/why not?

8. How is the description of Jesus in each letter particularly relevant to the situation that church faced?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Think about the sources of pressure faced by these churches. Which of these sources of personal, internal or external opposition do you think our church is facing at the moment? Which is most dangerous?



STUDY 3 | Leaving Lukewarm Behind

Revelation 3

1. Think about an example of something appearing good in some way but turning out to be less-than-good. What was most disappointing about that experience?

READ | Revelation 3:1-22

2. As in study 2, fill out the table below for the churches of Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

	Sardis	Philadelphia	Laodicea
Who is speaking (i.e. what self-description is used)?			
What does he commend?			
What is his complaint?			
What is his command?			
What promise is given?			

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3. Consider Jesus' rebuke of Sardis and Laodicea. What do you notice about it? How does it differ from the rebukes in chapter 2?

- What do you think 'lukewarm' Christianity looks like in your church - or in your life?

4. Some in Sardis are commended – those whom Jesus describes as having 'not soiled their clothes' (v.4). When Jesus says 'they are worthy' to walk with him, is there any suggestion they've merited that worthiness in some way? Why/why not?

- In what way does this encourage you – or challenge you?

5. Like Smyrna (2:8-11) the church in Philadelphia stands out as not receiving any rebuke. Instead, like Smyrna, it is commended for 'enduring'. What sort of pressure/difficulty would this church likely have endured, and what would have been so difficult about it (think back to Smyrna, and the historical setting)?

- Without wanting to overstate the matter or be alarmist, are there any legitimate parallels to our experience as Christians living in contemporary western society? Why/why not?

6. Both Smyrna and Philadelphia have in common a reference to 'those who say they are Jews' but are instead 'a synagogue of Satan' (2:9 and 3:9). What do you think this metaphorical phrase means, and what do you think its connection is with the only two faithful churches?



FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

7. Look at the promises and invitations that Jesus makes to his people at the conclusion of each of the messages (all 7 of them). Which of these do you think is particularly pertinent to:

- The church in your country as a whole?

- Our church in particular?

8. Which of these promises do you need to hear and embrace now?

9. What might the challenges be for you in doing that?

STUDY 4 | Victory of the Lamb *Revelation 4–5*

1. Think about some common views about what heaven will be like, both Christian and non-Christian. What images and ideas spring to mind? What do they show about our hopes of the afterlife?

READ | Revelation 4

2. What impression are we given of the one who sits on the throne?

3. What do you think the other various people and objects represent?

4. What do the two hymns that are sung in this chapter tell us about God? How is his rule and kingdom different from earthly rule and kingdoms?

- How would this vision have helped the churches in chapters 2-3?
- Are you ever tempted to think that God isn't worthy of worship? What makes you think like this? How does Revelation 4 help you understand God afresh?



READ | Revelation 5

5. What does John see in vv.1-4? What do you think this might represent?

6. Why does John react as he does?

7. How do the descriptions of the Lamb in vv.6-8 build to show us who John is talking about?

8. The song in vv.9-10 explains how the Lamb became worthy. What did he do and for whom?
 - What does this tell us about who the gospel is for, and what our mission is as Christians?

9. What is the overwhelming response in vv.11-14 to what the Lamb has done?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. Do you live as if God is in fact ruling over all from his heavenly throne? What aspects of your life are challenged by this realisation?

11. How might you explain the essence of the Christian message to people from just these two chapters of Revelation?

STUDY 5 | The Chaos of History

Revelation 6–7

1. What are the biggest, most shocking events in world news that you have ever experienced? How did you feel as you heard of them, or watched them unfold on the news?

READ | Revelation 6:1–8

The opening of the seven seals is the first of several cycles of sevens that portray the world's history and its end.

2. The first four seals: What do each of these four horsemen do? How has this activity unfolded in our world over time?

3. What repeated phrase (v.2, 4 and 8) makes it clear who is in charge? What does this all tell us about how he exercises his will?

- What should the implications be for us as we witness war, disaster, famine or unrest at home or in other countries?

READ | Revelation 6:9–17



4. In v.9, what is the significance of who we see, where they are, and how they're dressed?

5. What do they pray for, and what must they wait for?

- Do you pray, like the martyrs, for the day of God's justice to come? If not, why not?

6. What event is portrayed when the sixth seal is opened (vv.12–17)?

7. What is the implied answer to the haunting question in v.17?

READ | Revelation 7

John sees the same scene from a different perspective – the four winds are best seen as the equivalent of the four horsemen. Here the focus is on the security of God's people.

8. Groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses teach that the 144,000 is a literal and limited number of saved peoples. How do we know that the number of people 'sealed' is symbolic (vv.4–8, 9) – and what is the point of the symbolism?

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9. What is the significance of their clothes and what they're holding?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. Do you find God's sovereignty over disaster a difficult truth to embrace? What do you find uncomfortable about it? What do you find comforting in it?

11. From these chapters, what blessings do you see God's people enjoying, both now and in eternity? How does this encourage you in the present?



STUDY 6 | Facing the Haters

Revelation 8–11

1. Who are you fearful of sharing the gospel with? What makes you hesitant?

READ | Revelation 8

The final seal is opened, but instead of ushering in The End it begins a new series of visions heralded by angles with trumpets. This is typical of John's apocalyptic method: he goes over the ground again and again; there is more to The End that we can readily take in – every series of visions brings out new facets of it.

2. What do you notice happening when the seventh seal is opened? What does this indicate?

3. How would you summarise what happens when the first four trumpets are blown, and 'when' this is taking place (vv.7-12; consider the imagery and the significance of a *third*)?

In chapter 9 the fifth trumpet signals the spiritual torture, as opposed to the physical sufferings, experienced by humankind. The source of this suffering is Satan who is called 'destroyer' (Hebrew: *Abaddon*; Greek: *Apollyon*; v.11). His agents come from 'the abyss' (vv.1-2, 11) and mete out torment on those 'who do not have God's seal on their foreheads'. This is a reminder that Satan isn't just the accuser of God's people; turning one's back on God is turning to Satan, and that is a spiritually tortured existence.

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The sixth trumpet call is followed by a voice speaking (surely God's, in response to the prayers of the people; 8:3-4). In consequence, four angels who had been 'bound at the great River Euphrates' are released (v.14). This unleashes physical death on a third of humankind. Yet, John comments, with more than a suggestion of sadness, despite this demonic death, those who weren't killed still 'did not repent' of their idolatry and immorality (vv.20-21).

Part of the message for us is that people cannot create paradise on earth. We never seem to learn that, despite our progress in certain spheres, there will be no uniform progress towards utopia. The principle and power of sin, corruption and evil appear ineradicable from history and society.

READ | Revelation 10 and 11:15–19

- 4.** In 10:1 – 11:7, an angel tells John/us what will take place with the seventh trumpet blast. What is it (cf. 10:7, 11:15)?
- 5.** What do you think is the significance of John's being given the little scroll to eat, and its dual sweetness and bitterness?

READ | Revelation 11:1–13

- 6.** Who do you think the two witnesses represent (also referred to as olive trees and lampstands)?



7. What happens to them, and how do the people react (vv.9-10)?

8. What happens next, and how do the people react (vv.11-12)?

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. Is it wrong to use 'scare tactics' in evangelism – that is, to warn people of the coming judgement of God? Why/why not?

10. What encouragement to persevere with gospel proclamation have you seen in this section of Revelation?

STUDY 7 | Whom Do You Worship? Revelation 12–14

1. Do you know anyone who has given up being a Christian? What happened, and what do you think lay behind that decision?

Revelation 12 retells the whole of human history as a drama involving three characters: a woman, a child, and a dragon.

READ | Revelation 12

2. In vv.1–6, what are we told about:

i. the woman?

ii. the dragon?

iii. the child?

Who do you think these characters represent?

3. What incidents in the life of Jesus and the church do these verses remind you of?



4. Verses 7–12 narrate a vivid heavenly battle between the dragon (Satan) and God’s angels. The dragon and his angels are defeated and thrown out of heaven. It’s not clear exactly when this battle takes place, but what is the decisive factor in the dragon’s defeat?

5. According to vv.13–17 what is Satan doing now?

- In light of chapter 12, how should Christians think about Satan, the church, and our own discipleship?

READ | Revelation 13

6. What do you think the two beasts represent, from their description?

7. What is confusing about the description of the second beast in v.11?

8. How do the two beasts combine to oppress people – and God’s people in particular?

- Where do you see the beasts at work in the world today?

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9. What theories have you heard about the meaning of the number 666 (v.18)? What do you think its significance might be?

Chapter 14 moves the focus away from earth to heaven – in particular, Mount Zion. The Lamb stands victorious, and with him are the 144,000. As the persecution continues to play out below, these saints are representative of all the redeemed: a holy, eternal worshipping community. Three angels are sent to remind the inhabitants of the earth, and those who have fallen for the beasts' lies, who's really in charge: God, 'the Maker of heaven and earth'. Eventually the Son of Man, in all his glory, comes and judges the earth.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. In your own situation, what particular threats to your faith do you face from:

- government?
- false religion?

11. Do you fear the oppression of which these chapters talk? If so, in what practical ways can we help each other to resist the hostility and seduction of our world?



STUDY 8 | The Justice of the Lamb

Revelation 15–16

1. Share a situation, either from recent news or from your own life, where justice wasn't done.

READ | Revelation 15

2. Compare the song of Moses in vv.3–4 to the original in Exodus 15 (look at vv.1–3 for brevity). What kind of scene does this set for us?

3. What has to happen before anyone can enter the sanctuary (v.8)? Why?

READ | Revelation 16

4. List the reasons for which God is pouring out his wrath in 16:2–7 (i.e. who has sinned, and what have they done?).

5. What's striking about what happens when the fourth and fifth bowls are poured out?

- Do you have a 'godly grief' for your sinfulness? In what ways have you found/do you find yourself trapped in either worldly sorrow or bitter opposition to God?

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The sixth plague climaxes in v.16 with the kings of the whole world assembling for battle against the humankind. This is the moment famously known as *Armageddon* – This Armageddon takes its name from *har* (Hebrew for mountain) of *Megiddo* (scene of many battles in antiquity and Israel's history).

6. What do vv.13–14 tell us is are the driving forces behind this horrendous conflict, and how do they do they bring it about?

READ | Psalm 2

7. In what sense is this psalm fulfilled in Revelation 15 and 16?

Once again we see the 'day of judgement' from a different camera angle to the previous accounts. This time, we're shown the judgement through the lens of Old testament judgements such as the plagues on Egypt, the drama of the Red Sea, and the fall of Babylon. Through this, as well as carefully-chosen themes such as the tabernacle and sanctuary, we're powerfully reminded of just how offensive our sin is to a holy and righteous God.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

8. 'The God of the Old Testament is a God of anger, but the God of the New Testament is a God of love'. From what we've learned in this study, how might you respond to such a comment?

9. Do you ever struggle with feeling that God's wrath towards sin isn't justified? How does Revelation 15 and 16 help you think this through?



STUDY 9 | The End of Evil

Revelation 17–20

1. Have you ever had to wait a long time for something? How did you feel during that time?

READ | Revelation 17

2. What clues are there in this confronting description as to what the figures of the beast and the woman represent?

3. What is John's reaction to this vision? Why do you think this is? Compare/contrast it with the reaction of those who are not saved.

- What's *your* reaction?

4. What is meant by the repeated phrase 'once was, now is not, and yet will come...'?

5. What becomes of the beast and the woman in the end?

READ | Revelation 18:1–10

In vv.1–3 we read of the fall of Babylon the Great (i.e. Rome, and all godless superpowers). In vv.4–8 we discover the fall of Rome will be an act of divine judgement on her economic injustice and exploitation; the 'verdict of heaven' is that she should receive 'double' in judgement (v.6), which means *in full, sufficient*.

6. Verse 4 commands Christians to 'come out of her'. What do you think this might mean in practice?

- What do you find most attractive and enjoyable about the world in which we live?
- How can you enjoy these blessing without being consumed by them?

The first half of chapter 19 is a series of praises to God for Babylon's judgement. This may feel odd to us, but it is a theme throughout Scripture: judgement, even though it is described in horrific terms, isn't something God's people will find abhorrent, because the right thing will have been done by a righteous God. And it isn't a self-righteous rejoicing; God's people also rejoice because their own sins are covered by the blood of the Lamb.

READ | Revelation 19:6–10

7. What invitation are we given in v.9?



- What are the signs that someone has accepted the invitation to the marriage feast of the Lamb?

READ | Revelation 20:1–6

8. What explanations have you heard about the meaning of the millennium pictured in these verses?

It should be noted that Revelation 20:1–6 is the only part of the Bible to mention the one thousand years. Furthermore, it's reasonable to argue that this numeral, like other numerals within Revelation, is symbolic (144,000, for example). Given this, it seems precarious to build so important a doctrine on a passage so brief and figurative.

Paul Barnett also makes the observation that the one thousand years is defined as beginning with the *first resurrection* (20:5) and ending at the *second death* (20:6). He writes: '*The first resurrection is Christ's historic resurrection, when those who lose their lives in faithful witness will (spiritually speaking) be raised with him (20:4, 6). The second death is when the dragon is sent into the fiery lake, presumably at the time of Christ's second coming.*' Thus, in Barnett's view, the one thousand years is that span of time, however long it proves to be, separating Christ's resurrection from his return.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

9. How does knowing the fate of the devil (and his forces) affect your own strength and courage?

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10. What difference do chapters 17–20 make to:

- Your priorities?
- Your prayer life?
- Your evangelism/sharing of the good news about Jesus?



STUDY 10 | New Creation *Revelation 21–22*

1. What are you most looking forward to in eternity?

READ | Revelation 21:1–8

2. What is new, and what has passed away?

3. Who and what will be at the heart of our experience of eternity (cf. vv.5–7)?

- If you're in a group and comfortable doing so, share what this will mean to you.

READ | Revelation 21:9–21

4. What do you think is the significance of each element of the New Jerusalem?

READ | Revelation 21:22–27

5. What is not present in the New Jerusalem, and what is the significance of each thing mentioned that will be absent?

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Verse 26 is striking. It implies that the glory and wealth of the nations will somehow be brought in and incorporated into the new creation. This means there is some kind of continuity between old and new creations; and there is redeemable value in aspects of our human art and culture.

6. How do people come to be in the new creation (v.27)?

- What does this encourage you to do/keep doing?

READ | Revelation 22

7. What do you make of the conclusion to the vision in v.5 (*and they will reign forever and ever*)? What do you think that will be like?

- What part of John's vision captures your imagination or speaks to your current challenges?

8. What phrase is repeated in verses 7 and 12? How could this have been true when John wrote Revelation almost 2000 years ago?

9. What are we to think about the teaching in Revelation, and what are we to do with it (cf. vv.6–16)?



FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATION

10. Are you more at home in Babylon the Prostitute or Jerusalem the Bride? What are the signs that would show you which is true for you?

11. How has God spoken to you through the words of Revelation? What specific steps are you going to take in response?

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