



# REVELATION

*More than conquerors*

10 Studies for Group or Personal Use

**Includes Leader's Guide**

*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

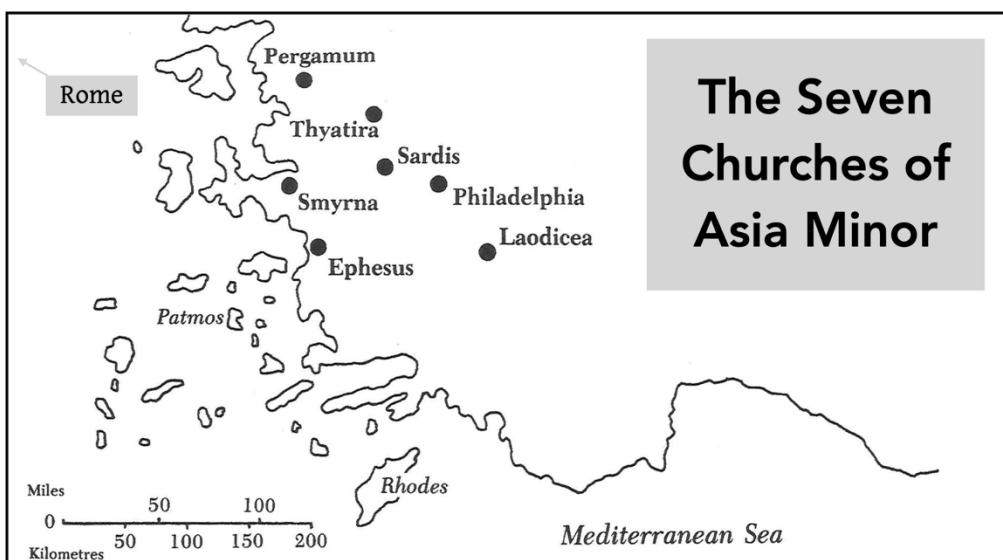
**White robes:** God's declaration of the wearer's purity, righteousness and vindication – and therefore also the right to be in God's presence

**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?

# Reader's Guide

## STUDY 1 | Behold Your King *Revelation 1*

2. It's a revelation of a number of things, not least of all 'what must take place' (and 'what has been and what is', v.19). However, primarily it's a 'revelation of Jesus Christ' - that is, a revelation of *who Jesus Christ is*.
3. **God** (i.e. God the Father) has given the revelation **to Jesus**, his Son. Jesus gave it **to his angel/messenger** to give **to John**. John then wrote it down **for us** to read.
4. God promises to bless us as we read the words of Revelation, and as we hear and respond to them. Ultimately, being blessed by God's 'grace and peace' will look like growing in our awe, trust and worship of Jesus Christ, which will happen as we embrace the truths of vv.5-8: that God is the beginning and the end of all things ('the Alpha and the Omega') and that he has made Jesus 'the ruler of the kings of the earth'.
5. John writes as a fellow sufferer (he is in exile) to churches that are suffering 'tribulation'.
6. Although these particular churches are named, the 'seven' suggests that they are meant to represent the whole of the church. This isn't a word just for a few specific people back then. This is a word for all of us for all time.
7. The 'One like the Son of Man' John sees has the full-length *robe and sash* as a king (v.13); *white hair* suggesting *wisdom* – like that of the 'Ancient of Days' (v.14; cf. Daniel 7:9); the *fiery eyes* and *bronze feet* indicating purity (vv.14-15); the *authoritative voice* of a conquering, all-powerful individual (v.15); the *sword-like tongue* of one who speaks the truth, and a *face shining like the sun* - that is, shining so divinely bright it can barely be looked at (v.16). He calls himself 'I am' – God's name for himself; 'the First and the Last' – like 'the Lord God ... Almighty' (*the Alpha and the Omega*; 1:8): sovereign over all history. He says he once was dead but now he's alive – forever – and that he holds the keys to death and Hades (he is the judge – like the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7).

The 'One like the Son of Man' is Jesus. He is clearly (a) human figure - he's *like* the Son of Man (b) a divine figure – God himself, and (c) he's experienced death and resurrection.

8. Jesus is standing 'among the lampstands'. In v.20 we learn with John that the lampstands represent the church. This means that Jesus is not separate and distant, he is right there with the beleaguered churches of the world as they face the tension and pressure of living in a hostile, aggressive world.
10. When we see Jesus in all his glory, our only reaction is to fall down and worship him, in love and gratitude if we have been forgiven, or in dread fear if we have not.

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



2. Each description refers to an aspect of John's descriptions of Christ in 1:12-20. It is *this* Jesus, the risen, divine Son of Man, who walks among his people speaking words of encouragement and rebuke to them.
5. Jesus/the Spirit generally encourages the churches that they haven't denied him, despite being under considerable pressure to do so. However, his consistent charge is to 'repent'. Each of these churches has in some way not had Jesus at the centre, which in turn has led to a toleration of ungodly teaching and practices.
7. They face the pressure of poverty, yet they are encouraged in their spiritual wealth. They're slandered, yet those slandering them are not speaking for God. And they face imprisonment, but that affliction will not be permanent. Much of the persecution they face would likely stem from pressure to conform to the cult of emperor worship (see *Introduction*).
8. Look back to the previous study (question 7 in particular!) and think about the meaning of the images applied to Jesus.

### STUDY 3 | Leaving Lukewarm Behind *Revelation 3*

3. Neither church is accused by Jesus of grievous moral failing, or tolerating false teaching, like Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira. However, neither church is 'all in' for God - they both only have the *appearance* of spiritual life and vitality: Sardis appears alive but is actually dead; Laodicea appears to have it all - including wealth - but this just makes them half-hearted about God.
4. On the surface it may read that way. However, their unsoiled white robes and worthiness is linked with their names having been written *already* in the book of life. Thus, 'for they are worthy' doesn't mean they have merited their justification, rather that they have done nothing to forfeit it.
5. Like most of the churches at this time, the main pressure the Philadelphians would likely have faced was to take part in the cult of emperor worship (see *Series Overview*). From the reference to the 'the hour of testing' (v.10) it appears that the Roman authorities were not shy in punishing those who refused to participate. And from what is said about the so-called Jews (v.9; and back in 2:9-10) Roman persecution appears to have arisen as a direct result from Jewish complaints to local officials. Much like those who had to live under the brutal and paranoid regimes of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, this reality would have been especially stressful.
6. God's chosen people were the Jews, and so 'Jews' here appears to be a spiritual designation referring to those who trust in Christ (a la *Abraham's descendants* in Galatians 3:29). Thus, the phrase employs ironically figurative language to say that those who reject Christ, even if they are ethnically 'Jews', forfeit their chance to be among God's chosen people - their only 'synagogue' is that of God's great enemy. By contrast, the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, because of their faithfulness to Christ, are part of the true people of God - despite what present circumstances may suggest.

### STUDY 4 | The Victory of the Lamb *Revelation 4-5*

2. It's a scene reminiscent of the Ancient of Days (cf. Daniel 7:9). His throne suggests supreme power, and this is further indicated by his being at the centre of everything, and the response of all the other beings in the throne room, who worship and adore him and give him all their glory.

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- 3.** The seven torches represent the Holy Spirit (7=perfection). The 24 elders appears to be a symbol of both the old and new covenant (12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles), and so they most likely represent the totality of God's people throughout history. The four living creatures are drawn from Ezekiel's vision of God's throne (Ezekiel 1), together with the six wings and song of the seraphs in Isaiah 6:2-3; they represent all animate creation.
- 4.** Unlike earthly rulers and kingdoms: God is holy; God always was, is present now, and always will be; God is the creator of all things. He is worthy to receive glory and honour and power (the implication being that the kingdoms of this world are not); our very existence depends on God.
- 5.** John sees a scroll with seven seals in the right hand of the one on the throne (v.1). What it contains we're not told, but it since it is in the hand of God (and because of who opens it, vv.5-7)) it likely has something to do with God's plan for the restoration of the world.
- 6.** So much is lost. He has seen the glory of God in heaven, and God holds out his purposes for history, 'ready to go', as it were – but no-one is able to unfold them. In this moment it appears to John that there is no-one to sort out the mess of the world.
- 7.** The Lion of Judah and the Root of David are references to the promised messianic King of Jewish hope, who comes and restores the kingdom of God. He is a mighty Lion and a slaughtered Lamb. He is a king and a sacrifice. He is divine: he has seven horns (he's perfectly powerful), he has seven eyes (he sees everything perfectly), and the seven Spirits (i.e. the Holy Spirit) are intimately connected with him. He is Christ the Lord.
- 8.** He died to redeem his people – his people who come, not only from Judah/Israel, but 'from every tribe and language and people and nation'.
- 9.** The Lamb receives the acclamation of heaven. Indeed, all creation takes up the refrain in vv.13-14 – the 'failure' of the cross has turned out to be the turning point history and is the focus of heaven's worship! Suffering leads to victory.

## STUDY 5 | The Chaos of History

### Revelation 6–7

- 2.** The first conquers; the second removes peace and incites violence; the third 'weighs' things; the fourth brings death. Throughout history, and in many parts of the world today, we see external conquest, internal conflict, famine and rampant inflation, and widespread death.
- 3.** *Was given or was empowered.* It's the Lamb who opens the seals; it's Jesus who is in charge of all these things. The way it is expressed here shows that they are the result of what some might call his *permissive will*: he opens the seals and gives power to the horsemen to unleash their horrors on a restricted portion of the world's population. Yet, even as these consequences of the fall are permitted to rage throughout the world, their effect is moderated and held back from what it might be.
- 4.** We see martyred Christians – those killed specifically for being faithful to Christ – under an altar in heaven. Since the earthly temple was a copy (or representation) of the true heavenly one (e.g. Hebrews 9), the altar here shows that the deaths of those under it are seen by God as a sacrifice; they're not simply murders, but offerings to God (like how Paul speaks of himself in 2 Timothy 4:6). The martyrs are given a



white robe, symbolising their vindication and victory. The made a judgement against them, but God makes a counter-judgment for them.

5. They pray for justice – ‘How long?’ is their cry. But the time has not yet come – there are, soberingly, more martyrs to come; this battle is not yet done.
6. The end of the world: the judgement of God on the wicked, and the vindication before every person of ‘the One seated on the throne’ and ‘the Lamb’.
7. No-one. It is clear that when Christ returns in judgement, all who have rejected and opposed him will fall – people will wish they were crushed by a rockfall rather than face the Living God.
8. There are various symbolic elements to this scene: the ‘four corners of the earth’; the ‘four winds of the earth’; the reference immediately after the 144,000 to the ‘vast multitude’. The point is that God is at work gathering his people throughout all the earth (and time), and that his people are known and numbered. They’re all ‘sealed’ by the Holy Spirit so that none will be lost. The number should not evoke fear at being excluded but confidence that, if we belong to Christ, we’re utterly safe and will not be forgotten.
9. They wear the white robes of the righteousness of Christ, and they carry palm branches – a symbol of victory. Despite the immense effort it took to remain faithful, they know it’s by grace they are saved (i.e. by *Jesus’ blood and righteousness*), and so they know who gets the praise and glory for everything: ‘Salvation belongs to our God!’

## STUDY 6 | Facing the Haters

### Revelation 8–11

2. There’s ‘silence in heaven for about half an hour’. It might be connected with the prayers of the saints (v.5), or it could be ‘the calm before the storm’ of God’s severe judgement. Either way, it indicates a solemn and impressive moment: what is happening/about to happen is no small thing.
3. Various parts of the cosmos are bombarded by God’s judgement. It is a severe judgment, involving destruction and death. Despite their severity, however, these events are not The End. One third is destroyed which, while a great many, is not total (symbolically, one third means ‘many, but not a majority’). This is an example of John’s ‘same events, different angle’: this is judgement *within* history (like the four horsemen and four winds) that points to a judgement to be completely revealed *at the end* of history. But this judgement also speaks of God’s (severe) mercy: two-thirds of the cosmos is spared.
4. It is the coming of the kingdom of God in its fullness, the one announced to and through the prophets and servants of God – when the throne room scene of chapter 4 becomes the reality for the whole world.
5. The scroll is a symbol of proclamation, that there’s a message from God to speak. This evokes the prophet Ezekiel, who in a vision was given a bittersweet scroll to eat, then told to ‘go, speak to the house of Israel’ (Ezekiel 2:8–3:3). As in Ezekiel’s time, John’s message (the gospel) is both sweet (the promise of God’s love and mercy) and bitter (the reality of judgement).
6. The two witnesses of v.3 are God’s people: his royal priesthood. Mission is both a priestly activity (representing God to the world) and a royal activity (extending Christ’s reign by calling on people to

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submit to his authority). And through our words we bring the fire of divine judgement on those who reject our message (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

7. They're killed by the beast from the Abyss – a reference to Satan, perhaps through his influence and control of the persecuting state. The people treat these murders like Christmas – they throw a party and exchange presents over the dead bodies, as Jesus himself said would happen (cf. John 16:20).

8. The witnesses are raised back to life, and 'great fear' falls on the people who see it. It's unlikely that the resurrection of the two witnesses is to be understood literally. It presents the truth of history as a whole: the church is persecuted, Christians are martyred, and at times the cause of Christ seems defeated. But through 'the breath of life from God' the church survives and comes back with renewed strength, and hostile regimes are shaken by its enduring life.

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

2.
  - i. *the woman*: Clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet, a crown of 12 stars. She's pregnant and in labour.
  - ii. *the dragon*: *Frightening*: fiery red, with seven heads and ten horns, wearing seven diadems. *Destructive*: his tail *hurls* a third of the stars to earth; he waits before the woman to *devour* her newborn child.
  - iii. *the child*: A male – a Son who is powerfully going to lead and care for all nations. Taken to be with God on his throne.

**The woman** could be Mary since she gives birth to Jesus. But the 'twelve stars' help identify her as Israel (the twelve tribes). Thus, the woman, who appears to span the whole history of redemption, most likely represents God's people as a whole, from whom comes the Messiah (*a la* Isaiah 9:6). **The dragon** is Satan (so v.9) and is portrayed as implacably opposed to God and terrifyingly dangerous: clever, murderous, and with enormous power. **The child** is Jesus. Verse 5 quotes from Psalm 2:9, where God's Messiah receives an iron sceptre to rule the nations, and the child is divinely 'caught up to God and to His throne'.

3. These verses seem to refer to Jesus' first coming as a single event, encompassing his birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and establishment of the church. There are strong echoes of Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus, and the family's refugee flight to safety in Egypt. The vivid imagery of demonic power also brings to mind the cross, and Satan's almost-victory there, before Jesus' resurrection and ascension to the safety and glory of heaven. This scene also evokes Satan's attempts throughout time to destroy God's people/the church, only for it to be spared.

4. He is 'conquered [...] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of [the brothers'] testimony' (v.11). It's the coming of Jesus, and in particular his death and resurrection, that has changed the nature of the heavens and the earth forever.

5. Verses 13–17 tell us that having been thrown down to earth, Satan is in a rage; he is doomed but still dangerous, like a defeated army that is in full retreat and yet doing its utmost to inflict whatever damage it can on the victors – in this case, the church. Satan's focus is on 'the testimony about Jesus' (v.17); it's





the testimony – the gospel – that draws others to Christ’s forgiveness. And it’s the faithful bearing of that testimony through persecution and suffering that brings saints, like their saviour, to heaven at last.

**6.** The beasts together represent the fundamentally godless political and military power of empire. For John, this was embodied in Rome. The ten horns, seven heads and ten crowns are a reworking of the images in Daniel 7, in which Daniel saw successive empires. Though clearly resembling Rome in John’s present, these beasts could be applied to any fundamentally godless empire throughout history: the first beast speaks ‘blasphemies’ (v.5) and the second ‘compels the earth and those who live on it to worship the first beast’ (v.12).

**7.** It looks like a lamb – innocent and harmless, in a twisted parody of Jesus – but it speaks the words of the dragon, Satan.

**8.** Because the beasts demand allegiance, this inevitably brings them into conflict with God’s people, because we have a competing allegiance. So they wage war against the church (v.7) and the results are inevitable: Christians will be imprisoned and martyred (vv.9-10). The two beasts show two ways of dominating cultures: the first beast wielded power through blunt force, but the second produces signs and images to seduce, impress and coerce the peoples of the earth (vv.13–15).

**9.** Three main approaches have been taken to its meaning: **(1)** It’s a code for an individual in a Hebrew system in which letters were assigned numeric value. This is possible, but it’s also too easy to make the numbers add up to pretty much any historical figure **(2)** It refers to a contemporary oppressive world system, either economic or military. However, this is best thought of as part of the overall oppression of Christians **(3)** It is symbolic, and may represent one less than the perfection represented by 777. If so, John is saying that the wise person recognises imperial/worldly power is not the ultimate good, nor the final word in history; it portrays itself as perfection but constantly falls short. This seems most in keeping with the interpretive pattern of the rest of Revelation.

## **STUDY 8 | The Justice of the Lamb**

### **Revelation 15–16**

**2.** It reminds us that God’s has a long history of powerfully redeeming his people, but that that redemption is one side of a coin, the other being the judgement of those opposed to God (often expressed in those who oppress his people). This is what is unfolding in chapters 15 and 16, only on a cosmic scale.

**3.** Before anyone can enter God’s sanctuary, his holy wrath must be displayed and his judgement on sin completed. This is because God is profoundly holy – far beyond what we can comprehend. But this vision gives us a sense; in the final judgement, God cannot and will not tolerate any impurity.

**4.** There are two reasons given – or implied – for God’s pouring out his wrath (1) People have borne the mark of the beast and worshipped his image (v.2), and (2) People have killed God’s people (‘poured out the blood of the saints and the prophets’, v.6).

**5.** Those who are judged refuse to repent. Instead, they continue to blaspheme and curse God, even though they are by now fully aware of his true holiness and glory.

**6.** John describes ‘three unclean spirits’ coming from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (i.e. the beast from the earth). These demonic spirits they produce perform ‘signs’, which serve to persuade and influence ‘the kings of the whole world’ to gather for battle, apparently in the belief that

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each is invincible. It's a reminder that the same evil triad that was behind all the sinfulness and persecution in chapters 12 and 13 will continue working in the world against God and his people until the very end.

**7.** Psalm 2 depicts the kings and rulers of the earth 'taking their stand' and 'conspiring together against the Lord' – only for the 'the One enthroned in heaven' to laugh at them, then speak in his holy anger and terrify them in his righteous wrath. This is vividly fulfilled in Revelation 15 and 16: there is global rebellion against God until the very end – including an actual 'gathering together' of kings and rulers to do battle with God. But it's ultimately futile – God is the Almighty, and when the time comes he will judge the earth, and he will do so through his Son – the Lamb (Rev 16:3) – who will 'break them with a rod of iron' and 'shatter them like pottery' (Ps 2:9).

## STUDY 9 | The End of Evil

### Revelation 17–20

**2.** The woman and the beast represent Rome. There are many clues to this: as we've already seen, the beast is a symbol of godless power and rule; cities and nations often were (and still are) depicted as women, and this woman consorts with 'the kings of the earth'; she has the identifying name *Babylon the Great* on her forehead, referencing the mightiest and most pagan city in Jewish memory; the *many waters* on which she sits are identified as the *peoples, multitudes, nations and language* ruled by Rome; her clothing (purple and scarlet clothing, gold, precious stones) symbolise her regal status; and she is *drunk on the blood of the saints* – a clear reference to the persecution of Christians by Rome.

**3.** John, we're told, is astonished by this vision. Probably and primarily in dread; but also possibly with attraction – the image is jarringly dissonant: a beautiful, bejewelled, beguiling woman with ruthless, bloody intent. The unsaved are astonished too, but likely with adoration at the strength and power of the woman and beast instead of dread.

**4.** The phrase appears twice in v.8, and is slightly rephrased in vv.11 and 12. It means that the beast manifests itself in one form. This then passes away (i.e. 'is not'), only for the beast to return throughout history in other guises (kingdoms and rulers come and go). The phrase is a parody of the living God 'who is and who was and who is to come' (1:8; 4:8; 11:16; 16:5).

**5.** Here, the beast and the woman are destroyed by a toxic mixture of internal strife and external rebellion; though the woman 'rides' on the beast and 'rules' over kings (vv.7, 18), in v.16 they turn on her and destroy her. This is what happens. Indeed, this is precisely what happened in AD 410 when Rome was sacked by people it had once ruled. Again, the symbolic numbers probably don't refer to specific kings but recurring political empires and systems. So these chapters speak simultaneously to the specific situation of first-century Rome and to every age.

**6.** The command isn't talking about a geographical movement, but an ideological one. Jesus wants us to adopt a different set of values, different set of priorities, different allegiance and different object of worship – we move from citizenship on earth to citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20).

**7.** The song of heaven turns into a second invitation – to the marriage feast of the Lamb. There are telling contrasts with chapter 17: instead of an invitation to immorality (17:2), we're invited to a marriage (19:7); instead of a woman clothed in the purple of a pagan empire (17:4), we see a bride clothed in the fine linen of righteous deeds (19:8).



**8.** There are different ways of reading these chapters of Revelation, depending on whether you take them to be describing a sequential series of events that take place in the future, or symbolic of something that is happening throughout history. There are three main views (with variations):

**Premillennialism** holds that Christ will return before a literal thousand-year reign on earth. This prosperous reign will end with the great battle of Armageddon, after which the final judgement will take place.

**Postmillennialism** holds that Christ will return after the thousand years. Postmillennialists believe that the millennium is a future golden age in which the church grows and exercises a positive influence on society. After this Christ will return and the final judgement will take place.

**Amillennialism** holds that the thousand years isn't the future, but is a symbolic reference to the present age of the church. The millennium is therefore between the first and second comings of Christ.

## STUDY 10 | New Creation Revelation 21–22

**2.** Everything is new, including heaven, earth and Jerusalem. The first heaven and the first earth, crying, pain, death and illness have all gone. As Tim Chester puts it: 'In the new creation there will be no need for handkerchiefs, hospitals or hearses'.

**3.** Jesus, and our relationship with him. We will be comforted and showered with grace (v.6).

**4.** The numbers are staggering. The city is 1400 miles/2250 kms square and the same tall. By contrast, Mt Everest is 6 miles/9.7 kms high! The walls are 65m. This tells us that what is coming is far beyond what we can experience or imagine, and that those who dwell in it will be eternally secure. Also, this perfect cube echoes the Most Holy Place in Solomon's temple (cf. 1 Kings 6:20).

**5.** (1) *There is no temple.* The New Jerusalem is described almost like a gigantic Most Holy Place – the place where God dwells. As such there is no need for separation or sacrifice; everyone has access to the Father and the Son. (2) *No sun or moon.* We have no need of their light because God is present to light our path. (3) *No night / the gates are always open.* In a human city closed gates were necessary to prevent intruders and the dark deeds done at night. No need for that, because evil of all kinds has been dealt with. (4) *Nothing impure.* Eternity can never be a re-run of the first Eden, which was ruined through the corrupting presence of the serpent.

**6.** Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. That is, those who have received forgiveness through the death of Jesus.

**7.** It's hard to know what this will be like, but it will involve engagement and work. Presumably, we will return to the original Genesis mandate to subdue the world (and the universe) and fill it to the praise of God's glory.

**8.** Even though Jesus has not come yet – after 2000 years – he is coming 'soon'. Christians are meant to live knowing and thinking that Christ will return any moment, and at just the right time. Every day he delays is another day of mercy and gospel opportunity. Every day he delays, more people are being brought into his kingdom. We're called to be patient, and remember that *with the Lord, a thousand years are as a day* (Psalm 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8).

**9.** We're to know that *these words are true* (v.6), that *these words are to be kept* (vv.7–9), and that *these words are to be read* (vv.10–11). And we to *continue doing right* (v.11) – even if no-one else is.

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