

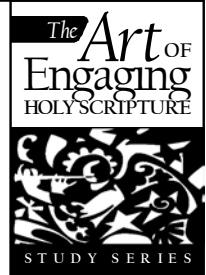
THE CLIMAX^{OF} PROPHECY



**A Small Group Study in
The Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John**

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what
the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Revelation 2:7



The Climax of Prophecy

THE ART OF ENGAGING HOLY SCRIPTURE STUDY SERIES

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OPENING

:05

Welcome and Prayer

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray.

Silence

Gracious God, we thank you for the privilege of reading, reflecting, and praying over the Scriptures in a small group community; we pray you open us to the presence of your Holy Spirit in the Scripture and in us, through Christ our Lord. *Amen*

Overview of the Session

We'll begin this morning with an introduction to the goal and basic approach of our Small Group Studies program and then a word about my role as facilitator. Next, we'll have the opportunity to introduce ourselves and say a word or two about being in this study. Our study topics this morning will include a brief introduction to our study of Revelation, an introduction to our learning and study method, what we call *The Art of Engaging Holy Scripture*, which we'll learn by doing together this morning.

Let's turn now to the goal and basic approach of our Small Group Studies on page ii of the introduction. As we work our way through this study over the coming weeks, you will quickly notice that the learning process we employ in our small group studies is not what is commonly thought of as the traditional learning environment in which a teacher disseminates information. Our small group studies employ the models of learning through engagement or dialogue, the case study method, and learning in and through community. This pedagogical approach makes use of preferred learning models in both the academy and the work place over the last two decades. With regard to the Bible, our method (*The Art of Engaging Holy Scripture*) employs a convergence of ancient and modern theological perspectives on how to approach the Holy Scriptures. This method is in the center of current discussions on how the message of the Bible can best be learned, understood, and practiced.



The Revelation of Jesus Christ

LEARNING COMMUNITY

:50

LIFE SHARING

Each week we gather to explore Holy Scripture and to receive what God has for us through our exploration. We do this as a community. Consequently, we will focus upon two equally important tasks. The first task is getting to know one another by sharing our own stories and listening to the stories of others. The second task is learning the content of Christian faith and practice by interacting with God through God's story in Holy Scripture. So each week we, as the learning community, will spend time in both Life Sharing and Group Study.

Sharing Our Stories

20 minutes

1. Let's begin by taking a few moments to say our names, where we live, how we got connected to Church of Our Saviour, and how long we've been attending.
2. What has brought you to this small group study, and what is one thing you hope to gain from being here?

GROUP STUDY

Introduction to the Book of Revelation

5 minutes

Throughout the course of this small group study, there will be many opportunities, in both group and personal study, to become more familiar with various aspects of the book of Revelation, all designed to help us cultivate a deeper appreciation for what the book of Revelation is and for the promise Revelation holds for us in its ongoing role as Holy Scripture. Today, therefore, we will begin with the briefest of introductions, providing us with a basic orientation to Revelation and thereby giving us time to practice our method of reading and studying Scripture.¹

First of all, the name of the book, *The Revelation to John*, takes its name from the opening words of the book, "The revelation of Jesus Christ. . . to his servant John." Please note, that the shortened name of the book is *Revelation* (singular) and not *Revelations* (plural), for while there are many strange and different visionary images and scenes throughout Revelation, the book as a whole constitutes one single revelation given to and experienced by a first-century Christian named John (not the apostle but another John).

Secondly, as is the case with all the writings of the New Testament, Revelation was originally written in Greek. So standing behind the word translated as *revelation* stands the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which, as you can see, is where we get our English word *apocalypse*. Consequently, the book of Revelation is also referred to as St. John's Apocalypse, or just the Apocalypse. Now given that the book of Revelation is primarily associated with images of ultimate death and destruction, reinforced in part by movies such as *Apocalypse Now*, one might have the impression that the Greek word *apocalyp-*

¹ An introductory explanation of our method, *The Art of Engaging Holy Scripture*, is in Appendix A on pages A-13 to 14.



sis means something like death, destruction, and/or the cataclysmic end of the world. In fact, however, *apocalypsis* simply means “an uncovering, a disclosure, a revelation.” So, for example, when Jesus prays, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;” (Matt 11:25; cf. Luke 10:21), the *have revealed* is the verb, *apocalyptō*, meaning “to uncover, to disclose, to reveal, to make known.” The book of Revelation is, therefore, an unveiling, a disclosure of something hidden.

What exactly is revealed will be part of the ongoing discovery of this study. But, in general, what Revelation reveals are *the things of earth as seen from the vantage point of heaven*. That is, in his vision John is transported into heaven and into the future that he might, with eyes opened by God, see the world of his day, its events and happenings, from God’s perspective. Through our own engagement with Revelation, we too are ushered into heaven and into the future in order that we might begin to see our world — its history, its politics, its economics, its power structures, etc. — from God’s perspective and to have our eyes transformed by God’s vision for the redemption and renewal of all creation.

Community Engagement — Revelation 1:1–3

8 minutes

What we want to do now is jump right into reading Revelation. As indicated earlier, we will introduce our method of reading and studying by doing it together. So let’s take a quick minute to read Rev 1:1–3 together, and then I will guide us through our method.

Revelation 1:1–3

^{1:1} The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing? Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Personal Engagement — Revelation 1:4–8

8 minutes

This time we will take eight minutes or so to read the passage quietly on our own and jot down our observations, attractions, and responses. Following that we'll take a few minutes to share our engagement with one another. Remember, we are just beginning and this is not a test or a contest. What will be valuable to all of us is to see that we will observe different things, be attracted to different things—or perhaps be attracted to nothing, and our responses will be different. Some of us might discover that our attractions and responses are simply questions. What's important to keep in mind is that everyone's experience has value.

Revelation 1:4–8

^{1:4} John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him;

and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing? Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?



Community Engagement — Revelation 1:4–8

Sharing Our Personal Responses

- ❖ Observation
- ❖ Attraction
- ❖ Response

The Climax of Prophecy

2 minutes

The title of this study borrows its name from a book of essays, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, by Richard Bauckham.² In it, Bauckham states, “John ... understood his prophecy to be the climax of the tradition of Old Testament prophecy, because in the revelation made to him by Jesus Christ was disclosed the secret of the divine purpose for the final coming of the kingdom of God” (xvi). That is, Israel’s prophets had predicted that one day all the nations of the world would come to worship Israel’s God, the only true God, the creator of heaven and earth. Moreover, these prophets of the Old Testament scriptures foresaw that in the last days before God’s final purposes for creation were established, God’s people would undergo persecution at the hands of worldly pagan powers. Yet, what John’s prophecy reveals is the mystery of God’s purposes, namely, that the conversion of the nations will come as a *consequence* of the oppression of God’s people, and “the key to both is the task of faithful witness in the face of all opposition, to which the followers of the Lamb, his readers, are now called” (xvi).

The Structure of the Book of Revelation

PROLOGUE		1:1–8
1:1–3	Introduction to the Revelation	
1:4–8	Salutation	
JOHN’S INAUGURAL VISION OF CHRIST		1:9–3:22
1:9–20	John’s Vision of the Son of Man	
2:1–3:22	The Seven Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor	
JOHN’S INAUGURAL VISION OF HEAVEN		4:1–16:21
4:1–5:14	The Vision of the Heavenly Throne Room	
6:1–8:5	The Seven Seals of the Scroll Opened by the Lamb	
8:6–11:19	The Seven Trumpets Blown by the Seven Angels	
12:1–15:4	The Story of God’s People in Conflict with Evil	
15:5–16:21	The Seven Bowls of God’s Wrath Poured Out by Seven Angels	
A TALE OF TWO CITIES		17:1–22:9
17:1–19:10	Babylon the Harlot	
19:11–21:8	The Transition from Babylon to the New Jerusalem	
21:9–22:9	New Jerusalem the Bride	
EPILOGUE		22:6–21

² Richard Bauckham is Professor of New Testament Studies at St. Mary’s College at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

CLOSING

:05

What to Bring Each Week

- ❖ Bible (If you need help choosing a Bible, see “Translations and Choosing a Bible” starting on page A–7 in *Appendices of the Bible*.)
- ❖ Pen or pencil
- ❖ *The Climax of Prophecy* Participant’s Guide
- ❖ *Appendices of the Bible* Supplemental Resource
- ❖ Any reflections, questions, or experiences from your times of Personal Study that you would be willing to share.

An Important Additional Resource for Your Library — A Bible Dictionary

A good Bible dictionary is an essential tool. Bible dictionaries are discussed on page A.10, section 3 of the *Appendices of the Bible*.

Looking Ahead

Personal Study. Below you will find a section entitled Personal Study, which includes studies that provide opportunities for you to group in your relationship with God through private prayer and the study of Holy Scripture. These studies also provide the foundation for next week’s group study.

- ❖ From time to time life gets unruly and we are unable to do everything we intend. Whenever you are unable to complete all of the personal studies, we suggest you do your best at least to read all of the selected Bible passages for the week (see Personal Study 1). Even if you don’t have time to ponder them carefully after our method, by reading them you will at least be able to keep up with the flow of thought of the material we are studying.

Small Group Covenant. Next week we will decide upon the ground rules for our small group gatherings. In order to facilitate this process, please read through the Small Group Covenant on page iii.

Special Note for First-Timers

If this is your first experience in one of our small group Bible studies, welcome! An explanation of the method of study we are using, *The Art of Engaging Holy Scripture*, is on pages A.13–14 of Appendix A. You will want to allow 20 minutes or so carefully to review these two pages. Having had the experience of practicing the method today, we hope the explanation will be more accessible. However, much like riding a bicycle, this method really is better “caught” than “taught”. We therefore urge you not to be discouraged if it seems a little unwieldy in the beginning. After a couple of weeks, it should begin to make sense. If at any time along the way you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact Jim Clark or Doug Gregg or your facilitator for assistance. Jim and Doug can be reached at the church office or by email: jclark@churchofoursaviour.org, dgregg@churchofoursaviour.org. Your facilitator will indicate how she or he can be reached.



PERSONAL STUDY

Four Fundamental Questions

As we go about the daily business of living life, we are constantly trying to make sense of the world and our lives in it. Consciously or unconsciously, we are seeking answers to a fundamental set of questions: Who is God? Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live? In the weeks ahead, we are going to keep these questions in mind because these are the same questions that Revelation deals with. These are the same sorts of questions that Christians, as individuals and as communities, living under imperial Roman rule at the end of the first century struggled to answer: Who is *God*? Who are *we*? Why are *we* here? How then shall *we* live? So as we read and reflect upon Revelation, we shall find ourselves struggling alongside those first-century Christians in Asia Minor as they searched to find appropriate responses to these questions, sometimes succeeding, many times failing. For in seeking to understand Revelation's framing of answers to these questions, ambiguous though they may be at times, we shall find direction for our own questions, both as the people of God (the community) and as persons of God (the individual).

Questions for the Community

Who is God?
Who are we?
Why are we here?
How then shall we live?

Questions for the Individual

Who is God?
Who am I?
Why am I here?
How then shall I live?



The Revelation of Jesus Christ

STUDY 1 — SEVEN MESSAGES TO SEVEN CHURCHES

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 1:1–3:22

30 to 40 minutes

“The Book of Revelation is a work of profound theology. But its literary form makes it impenetrable to many modern readers and open to all kinds of misinterpretations.”³ Without a doubt Revelation is a very different sort of book; not only is it quite different from modern books, it is also quite different from all the other books of the New Testament. So we begin our personal engagement with Revelation with the question: What sort of book is Revelation? The answer is important because “our answer determines our expectations of the book, the kind of meaning we expect to find in it,” and “misinterpretations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is.”⁴

So, what kind of book is Revelation? That is, what category, or genre, of literature does it fit into? As it turns out, Revelation fits at least three literary genres; it is an apocalypse (Rev 1:1), a prophecy (Rev 1:3), and an ancient letter (Rev 1:4). We shall briefly consider each of these in turn.

The Book of Revelation as Prophecy. First, as Rev 1:3 indicates Revelation is a prophecy intended to be read aloud in worship (cf. 22:6–7, 18–19). While much could be said about the nature and character of prophecy, we will confine our comments to one fundamental observation. In both Jewish and Christian traditions, prophecy involves both foretelling and forthtelling *with an emphasis upon the latter*. That is, biblical prophecy does at times have a predictive element though it often doesn't. And while the predictive dimension of prophecy is generally what comes to mind when people think of prophecy, prediction is not the primary characteristic of biblical prophecy and the activity of prophets. A prophet is first and foremost a spokesperson for God, one called, equipped, and commissioned by God to speak on God's behalf typically on matters of obedience and faithfulness to God and on matters of morality and social justice. Thus, one of the primary roles of a prophet was to speak out against the sins of idolatry and injustice (two sides of the same coin) and to call the people of God back to the love of God and the love of neighbor. When prophecy does make reference to particular events in the future, these predictions are generally, if not always, in service to the broader prophetic task of speaking forth God's concerns. Thus prophets may predict future events understood as God's bringing of judgment to a people who have refused to heed the prophets' messages concerning unfaithfulness and injustice. Sometimes to people in the midst of persecution and calamity, prophets were sent with messages of hope, speaking of God's future actions that would bring deliverance and an end to their suffering of injustice. In short then, biblical prophecy — a genre into which Revelation fits — is characterized by both forthtelling and foretelling, with forthtelling being the primary characteristic.

We belabor this point not to downplay the predictive element of prophecy but to provide some perspective by locating it within its proper relationship to the broader prophetic task. Because it is

³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), back cover.

⁴ Bauckham, *Theology*, 1.



quite common to assume that Revelation is primarily, if not exclusively, about the prediction of future events, there is the all too real danger of missing and/or misconstruing important features of John's vision, a vision which seeks to provide divine insight not only into what the future holds but also into what has taken place in the past and is taking place in the present. Thus, to reduce the prophetic character of Revelation to its predictive dimension can effectively eclipse the critical function of prophecy in its critique and denouncement of the social, political, and economic systems and power structures that are opposed to God and God's purposes.

The Book of Revelation as an Apocalypse. Secondly, Revelation fits into a category of ancient literature called an apocalypse. In our first group session comments were made about the general meaning of the word apocalypse as a disclosure or a revelation. But the word apocalypse can also be used in a more specific, technical sense to refer to a literary genre. We need not go into all of the details regarding what constitutes the genre of the apocalypse, but a few things are worth noting.

First, an apocalypse is a genre of ancient revelatory literature of which we have many examples in both Jewish and Christian circles before and after the time of Jesus (e.g. Daniel, 4 Ezra). A basic description of an apocalypse is a narrative in which a human being receives a revelation mediated by an otherworldly being (e.g., an angel), which discloses a transcendent reality. What is disclosed varies from apocalypse to apocalypse but apocalypses that are cosmic in orientation (that is, they have to do with the structure of the universe) disclose secrets of the heavenly realms while apocalypses that are eschatological in orientation (that is, they have to do with history and its ultimate significance) seek to reveal God's undisclosed plans for the consummation of human history. The book of Revelation reveals both cosmic and eschatological mysteries although the latter takes precedence.

As an apocalypse, Revelation seeks to disclose the transcendent, heavenly perspective on human affairs so that one can begin to see this world and its affairs from God's perspective. The extensive visual and auditory imagery of Revelation create a symbolic world of meaning designed to transform our own perceptions. In Revelation, we are taken into heaven, not in order that we might retreat or withdraw from the world but, so that we might actually see the world differently, that we might see the world in all its goodness but also in its brokenness with prophetic clarity. In effect, we are taken out of the world that we might know how to live in the world in accordance with God's vision and ultimate plan for creation. Revelation is in many ways focused upon future because like many apocalypses Revelation is concerned with the question of "Who is the Lord of the world? Who is it that is really in charge?" That is, Revelation's concern with the future is born out of its concern over God's sovereignty, over how God's sovereignty is going to be realized in a world of such blatant and obvious corruption, injustice, and violence. Revelation proclaims that, despite appearances to the contrary, God is still Lord and maintains confidence in God's ultimate victory over the forces of evil and chaos that threaten creation and discloses not only how we share in God's victory but also how we are called to participate in it.

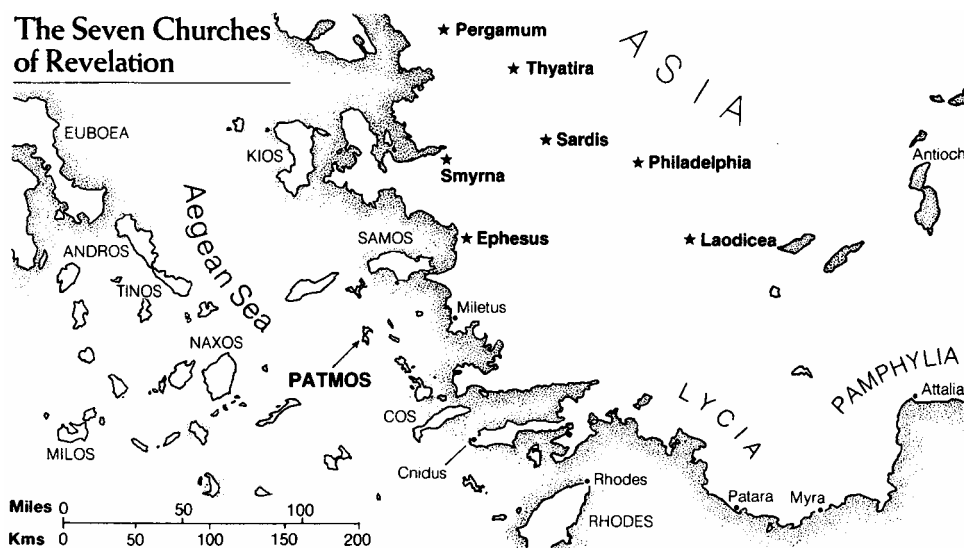
The Book of Revelation as an Ancient Letter. And finally, Revelation also fits the genre of an ancient letter, and in this respect is akin to most of the other New Testament writings. "The special character of a letter as a literary genre is that it enables the writer to specify those to whom he or she is writing and to address their situation as specifically as he or she may wish. Writings in most other literary genres are in principle addressed to a much less clearly defined audience: anyone who might plausibly be ex-

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

pected to read the work.”⁵ “Many misreadings of Revelation, especially those which assume that much of the book was not addressed to its first-century readers and could only be understood by later generations, have resulted from neglecting the fact that it is a letter.”⁶

Thus, as we read Revelation, we do well to keep in mind its epistolary character, the fact-that John communicated his prophetic, apocalyptic vision in the form of a letter addressed to specific churches situated within a particular context in first-century Asia Minor. We need to be open, for example, to the possibility that something Revelation speaks of as future may have already in fact taken place. At the same time, the recognition that Revelation was addressed to particular recipients in a particular time and place does not thereby preclude its ongoing significance for us and our twenty-first century context. On the contrary, Revelation continues to speak forth God’s Word, for the Word of God goes forth and sprouts and does not return to God empty until it accomplishes God’s purposes (see Isaiah 55:10–11). Revelation may not have been addressed to us, but Revelation never ceases to address us.

1. In one sitting, read through Revelation 1:1–3:22.
2. Find the following locations when you come to them in your reading. Beginning with Patmos (1:9), locate and draw a line to each of the following locations as you come to them in your reading.
 - ❖ Patmos (1:9); Ephesus (2:1); Smyrna (2:8); Pergamum (2:12); Thyatira (2:18); Sardis (3:1); Philadelphia (3:7); Laodicea (3:14)



3. Journal any of your observations, questions, thoughts, or reflections.

⁵ Bauckham, *Theology*, 13.

⁶ Bauckham, *Theology*, 12.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

STUDY 2 — JOHN’S VISION OF THE SON OF MAN

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that’s okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 1:9–20

20 to 30 minutes

As was noted previously in Study 1, Revelation is among other things an ancient letter, sent to seven churches in Asia Minor, wherein a Christian named John recounts in significant auditory and visual detail a vision he received on the island of Patmos on the Lord’s Day, that is, Sunday. In today’s study we look at the beginning of John’s visionary experience where he encounters Jesus as the Son of Man who instructs John to “write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches” (1:11).

This instruction is reiterated and slightly expanded in 1:19, “Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this.” This emphasis upon writing down what John sees is important, not least because it suggests that this vision is not for John alone but for all of God’s people, initially to John’s contemporaries, those with whom John shares “in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom, and the patient endurance” (1:9), and subsequently to John’s spiritual heirs, we who even now read what John wrote in our attempt to live as faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ today.

Significant also is that John is instructed to send this book to seven churches, not simply because this also demonstrates that John’s vision was intended for a wider audience but because it demonstrates that John’s vision was intended to address specific issues and current events. When one compares Revelation in NT with Daniel in the OT, with which it has many affinities, something interesting surfaces. In Daniel, the prophet Daniel is given a series of visions, having to do with things that were to take place. Daniel commits these visions to writing but is instructed to seal them up (Dan 8:26), an instruction that is repeated on at least two more occasions (12:4, 9). But why such an instruction? Because Daniel’s visions refer to things “many days from now” (Dan 8:26). Consequently, Daniel is instructed “to keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end” (12:4). Contrast then John’s vision in Revelation, which concerns “what soon must take place” (1:1). Thus the instruction for John to write his vision in a book and send it to the seven churches is because “the time is near” (1:3). Moreover, John is not instructed to seal up his vision because it concerns those of his own day not some generation in the far off distant future.

This, of course, raises a whole host of questions for us, about the significance of Revelation for us today and how we are, and if we are, to appropriate Revelation to our contemporary contexts. Nonetheless, part of the task of interpreting and appropriating Revelation is to discover more about the specific issues that John was intending to address.

1. Read through Rev 1:9–20 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing down your responses can be a very beneficial practice.



❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

STUDY 3 — TO THE ANGEL OF THE CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 3:7–13

20 to 30 minutes

Each of the seven messages to the seven churches exhibits the same basic elements and structure: identification of the recipients, a description of the sender, the body of the message, and a concluding promise.

First, each message begins with Jesus' instruction for John to write to the church of a particular city in the Roman province of Asia. "To the angel of the church in _____ write:"

Second, each message identifies the sender of the message, which is Jesus Christ, though not directly but through a variety of symbolic images. This part begins with, "These are the words of . . .," followed then by a symbolic characterization of Jesus that John has already used at least once before in reference to Jesus. According to Beale, "Christ . . . introduces himself with a description from the chapter 1 vision that most suits the situation of this church" (239).

Third, the body of the message is signaled with Jesus' saying, "I know . . .," followed by a message particular to the given church and including Jesus' assessment of their faithfulness or lack thereof. Often there are some very specific details.

Finally, each message concludes with a promise that Jesus directs to those who "conquer," that is, to those who remain faithful to Jesus to the end. In each case this promise is either prefaced or concluded with the words, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Interestingly, a close reading of each of these messages reveals a thematic thread that unites the message. That is, the symbolic description of Jesus, the body of the message, and the concluding promise are thematically woven together. So, for example the message to the church in Smyrna (2:8–11) opens with Jesus' being described as "the one who was dead and came to life." This leads into the body of the message wherein mention is made of their suffering and faithfulness unto death with the promise that they will receive a crown of life. And finally, they are told that the one who conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Today, as you read the letter intended for Philadelphia, you may wish to identify its thematic thread.

1. Read through Rev 3:7–13 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing your responses can be a very beneficial practice.



❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.

Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying

THE CLIMAX OF
PROPHECY



OPENING

:05

Welcome and Prayer

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray.

Silence

Dear God, continue to speak to us through your holy Word as you have spoken to your people in ages past, giving us the ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches through the testimony of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Overview of the Session

We begin this morning by reviewing our small group covenant. We will continue getting to know one another through some life sharing questions and by sharing experiences from our personal studies. In today's Group Study we look at Jesus' message to the church in Laodicea. Finally, we will look ahead to this week's personal studies where John becomes witness to a scene of heavenly worship.

LEARNING COMMUNITY

:50

LIFE SHARING

Our Small Group Covenant (see page iii)

3 minutes

Sharing Our Stories

15 minutes

1. What is something special to you about this season of the year (Fall, holidays, Halloween, Thanksgiving, [football season!], etc.) and how does this relate to your childhood?
2. What are some of your feelings about this study as we enter the second week?

Reflections from Personal Study

12 minutes

In last week's personal studies we looked at the genre of Revelation as a prophecy, an apocalypse, and a letter and then focused upon John's inaugural vision of Jesus as the Son of Man and the seven messages for the seven churches of Asia Minor.

- ❖ Do you have any questions about our method of reading, praying, and studying the Bible, *The Art of Engaging Holy Scripture*?
- ❖ Do you have any questions, reflections, or experiences from your personal study that you would be willing to share?



Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying

GROUP STUDY

Introduction

2 minutes

Today's passage is the seventh and final message of Jesus to the Asian churches. As we saw in this week's personal study, all of the messages follow the same general pattern. Of interest today is the refrain in the conclusion of each message: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Each of the messages is addressed to a particular church and deals with issues particular to that church, yet the refrain calls listeners to hear what God's Spirit is saying to the *churches*, plural. Thus, we like them are being called, as the church of Jesus Christ our Saviour, to listen, even now, to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

You will no doubt have noticed situated above the high altar in the sanctuary a stained-glass window in which Jesus stands at a door knocking. What you may not have noticed, however, is the door; it is missing an outside door handle or knob and so can only be opened from someone on the inside. This depiction of Jesus' knocking at a knobless door stands in a long line of Christian art, and, for reasons that will soon become apparent, has been associated with this message to the church of Laodicea.

Personal Engagement — Revelation 3:14–22

6 minutes

We will take the next six minutes or so to read the passage quietly on our own and jot down our observations, attractions, and responses. Following that we'll take a few minutes to share our engagement with one another.

¹⁴ And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

¹⁵ "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

²¹ To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."



Stain-glass window above the high altar at The Church of Our Saviour.



- ❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing? Does this passage raise any questions for me?

- ❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

- ❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Community Engagement — Revelation 3:14–22

12 minutes

Sharing Our Personal Responses

- ❖ Observation
- ❖ Attraction
- ❖ Response

CLOSING

:05

Looking Ahead

In this week’s Personal Study, we get our first glimpse into heaven as we enter with John into the heavenly throne room of God. We will look at the fundamentals of worship in Jewish and Christian traditions (Study 1) and then focus upon the worship offered to God (Study 2) and the worship offered to the Lamb (Study 3).

Special Note for First-Timers — The Bible

If you are new to studying the Bible, you might want to take a few minutes during the week to look through Appendix A: The Bible. It provides an overview of the organization of the Bible, how one navigates through it, and notes on choosing translations to use.

Materials

Next week please bring your Bible, your participant’s guide, your appendix, a pen or pencil, and any reflections, questions, or experiences from your times of Personal Study that you would be willing to share.



Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying

PERSONAL STUDY

STUDY 1 — THE HEAVENLY THRONE ROOM

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 4:1–5:14

30 to 40 minutes

In last week's studies we were partakers John's inaugural vision of Jesus, and we read the messages John was to send to the seven churches of Asia Minor. In this week's studies, we will be partakers of John's inaugural vision of heaven, which begins in the heavenly throne room of God.

Up to this point in Revelation, John's vision has taken place on earth (see Rev 1:9ff). But in 4:1, the visionary landscape shifts from earth to heaven. John looks and sees a door to heaven standing open and hears Jesus bidding him saying, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1). John then enters into heaven in the spirit, and the first sights and sounds that he encounters are from within the heavenly throne room where One seated upon the throne (God) is surrounded by all manner of heavenly hosts.

In this inaugural vision of the heavenly throne room, which constitutes Rev 4:1–5:14, the primary theme is *worship*. Now when we begin speaking of worship there is one very important thing to keep in mind, namely, that in both Jewish and Christian traditions, worship is reserved exclusively for God. That is, God and God alone is to be the sole recipient of worship, the sole recipient of our praise and adoration. Worship is the primary vocation of all of God's creation, and God as creator is the only One worthy to be worshipped. All other worship — that is, worship not directed to God and God alone — constitutes idolatry, the fundamental root sin. This Judeo-Christian sensibility is present throughout Holy Scripture, no less in Revelation. For example, on two separate occasions, John falls down at the feet of an angel, and on each occasion the angel responds with, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant! . . . Worship God!" (19:10; 22:9). Moreover, while there are twenty-four elders occupying twenty-four thrones situated around God's throne and so clearly occupying an exalted place in heaven, these same elders are never worshipped. In fact, the impression one gets is that their sole purpose is to offer perpetual worship to God. They are part of the company of heaven "who laud and magnify thy glorious Name, evermore praising thee, and saying . . ." (BCP 334; cf. ???)

This Jewish-Christian conviction and sensibility — that worship is reserved for God and God alone — makes what takes place in Rev 4–5 all the more astounding. For what we find in Rev 5 is worship, parallel to that just offered to God in Rev 4, being offered to Jesus with absolutely no sense that this is anything other than entirely appropriate and necessary. We will have more to say about this come Study 3, but it is this quality of this heavenly worship, of worship offered "to the One seated on the throne *and* to the Lamb" that constitutes Christian worship, which in turn lays at the heart of all Christian understandings and conceptions of God — who God is and how God acts.

Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying

STUDY 2 — WORTHY IS THE LORD GOD

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 4:1–11

20 to 30 minutes

In the first study, we considered the theme of worship as we reflected upon John's inaugural vision of heaven, his vision of the heavenly throne room wherein worship is offered to both God and Jesus. In today's study we will take the opportunity to gaze more intently upon the worship that is directed to "the one seated upon the throne" (Rev 4:1, 9–10, 13).

In Rev 4:1, the scene shifts from earth to heaven as John is taken in the spirit into heaven and, in particular, into the heavenly throne room of God, heaven's Holy of Holies. Here the first sight that confronts his eyes, the first image that dominates his vision is that of "one seated upon the throne." Following then is a description of those who surround the throne and of the worship they offer to the one seated upon the throne. In particular, we hear the words of the song that the four living creatures sing "day and night without ceasing," "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev 4:8). You may recognize these words that form part of the eucharistic liturgy of the Great Thanksgiving (BCP,). What this reveals is the fact that the liturgy and worship of the Church has been informed by and purposefully patterned after the worship that takes place in heaven, which we find reflected in certain passages throughout the Bible, notably Rev 4–5 and Isaiah 6 (see below). The worship that the Church and its members offer is one of participation. That is, the worship we offer to God is not of our own making, it is not something we do alone, it is not something that originates from ourselves. Quite the contrary, the worship we offer to God here on earth is to be understood as participating in the ongoing, ceaseless heavenly worship offered to God. We, quite literally, are "joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven" (BCP,).

Revelation 4:8

And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing:

Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.

Isaiah 6:2–3

Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.

Book of Common Prayer — Rite II

Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

(The last three lines are taken from the gospels on the occasion of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. (Mt 29:9; Mk 11:9–10; Lk 13:35; Jn 12:13).)



1. Read through Rev 4:1–11 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.

❖ One question you may wish to consider in your reading is, “Why is God being worshipped? Why do the heavenly hosts offer worship to the Lord God?”

2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing down your responses can be a very beneficial practice.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?



STUDY 3 — WORTHY IS THE LAMB

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 5:6–12

20 to 30 minutes

In Study 2, we focused our attention upon the heavenly worship being offered to the One seated upon the throne (i.e., God). In today's study, we turn our attention to the One occupying the space "between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders," to the Lamb standing as though slaughtered (i.e., Jesus).

In Study 1, the point was made that in both Jewish and Christian traditions worship is reserved for God and God alone. This Jewish-Christian sensibility is a corollary of the fundamental Jewish-Christian sensibility that there is only one God, the One who created the heavens and the earth. These sensibilities make today's reading all the more striking and astounding for as we shall see, the host of heaven offer worship to the Lamb that parallels and at times, in terms of language and description, goes beyond the worship offered to God. What then we see reflected here is the early Christian conviction that Jesus somehow, and mysteriously, belongs to the unique identity of the One and Only God of heaven and earth. Jesus is not being worshipped as another god but as God though all the while a distinction is maintained between the Lord God and the Lamb; they are one but not the same.

Now while it would take the Christian church another three centuries to work out the concepts and language appropriate to represent the relationship of Jesus to God — which have come down to us most notably in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds — what we have very early on is the common Christian practice of offering worship to Jesus, worship being offered by those who maintained the conviction that worship belonged to God and God alone. And it was this practice that led to the formation of the creeds not vice versa.

Thus the heavenly worship depicted in Rev 4–4 is distinctly *Christian* worship, that is, worship though particular to God is offered to Jesus Christ as well, thereby indicating that that Jesus is to be included within the unique identity of the One and Only God of all creation.

1. Read through Rev 5:6–12 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
 - ❖ One question you may wish to consider in your reading is, "Why is the Lamb being worshipped? Why do the heavenly hosts offer worship to the Lamb?"
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing your responses can be a very beneficial practice.
 - ❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?



Listen to What the Spirit Is Saying

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.

The Lion as the Lamb

THE CLIMAX OF
PROPHECY



OPENING

:05

Welcome and Prayer

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray.

Silence

Lord God Almighty, you are worthy to receive all glory and honor and power, for by your Word you created all things by your and through your Word you have begun for their restoration, through your Son Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slaughtered and who is with you and the Holy Spirit worthy of all our praise and thanksgiving. *Amen.*

Overview of the Session

We begin this morning sharing about what we do with our free time and sharing our experiences from personal study. Then we turn to our reflections from our personal study and John's vision of the heavenly throne room. In our group study, we continue in this scene of heavenly worship by looking more closely at the juxtaposition of images of Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb. Finally, we close with looking ahead at our personal studies this week, which show how God's people are called to participate in God's victory over evil.

LEARNING COMMUNITY

:50

LIFE SHARING

Sharing Our Stories

15 minutes

1. What was one thing you did in your free time when you were growing up?
2. What is one thing you do in your free time now?

Reflections from Personal Study

15 minutes

In last past week's personal studies, we looked at a scene of from the heavenly throne room wherein worship—properly understood as something due to God and God alone—is offered both to the One seated upon the throne (God) and to the Lamb (Jesus).

- ❖ Do you have any questions about our method of reading, praying, and studying the Bible, *The Art of Engaging Holy Scripture* or about other materials you reviewed in Appendix A?
- ❖ Do you have any questions, reflections, or experiences from your personal study that you would be willing to share?



The Lion as the Lamb

GROUP STUDY

Introduction

2 minutes

In today's reading, John begins weeping when no one is found worthy to open the scroll that contains God's "secret purpose for establishing his kingdom on earth."¹ In response, one of the elders says to John, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (5:5). Yet when John looks, he sees not a Lion but a Lamb "standing as though it had been slaughtered" (5:6). What is going on here is a subtle but extremely important juxtaposition of images, the meaning of which is one of the keys to understanding Revelation as a whole. The *Lion of Judah* and the *Root of David* are titles that evoke the idea of the Jewish Messiah as a nationalistic military conqueror; yet the image of the slaughtered Lamb, which recalls Jesus' death, evokes the notion of sacrificial death as the means of redemption and restoration. In other words, "by placing the image of the sacrificial victim (the Lamb) alongside those of the military conqueror (Lion of Judah, Root of David), John forges a new symbol of *conquest* by sacrificial death."²

Personal Engagement — Revelation 5:1–10

6 minutes

- ❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing? Does this passage raise any questions for me?

- ❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

- ❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Community Engagement — Revelation 5:1–10

12 minutes

Sharing Our Personal Responses

- ❖ Observation
- ❖ Attraction
- ❖ Response

¹ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 249.

² Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215.



CLOSING

:05

Looking Ahead

You may recall that each of the seven messages to the seven churches concluded with promises of life and salvation “to everyone who conquers” (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). With John’s vision of the Lamb standing as though slaughtered, a picture of what that conquering looks like begins to take shape. Insofar as the image of Jesus as the slaughtered Lamb provides the proper perspective of what it means for Jesus to be the conquering Lion, so also it provides the proper understanding of what it means for Christians to conquer. Jesus did not inflict violence but suffered violence as the means of creating the powers of evil. Likewise, the people of God are not called to inflict violence but to endure violence as the means of their participating with Jesus in God’s victory over the powers of evil, powers that are manifested in the earthly structures of society, politics, economics, etc.

As we shall see more clearly next week, the scroll reveals God’s secret plans for establishing his kingdom on earth, and it is Jesus’ victory on the cross that provides not only the initial and all-decisive victory but the model for how all subsequent victories are to be achieved.

In this week’s Personal Study, we get our first glimpse into heaven as we enter with John into the heavenly throne room of God. We will look at the fundamentals of worship in Jewish and Christian traditions (Study 1) and then focus upon the worship offered to God (Study 2) and the worship offered to the Lamb (Study 3).

Special Note — The Metanarrative

Though we have not referred to it yet, the “Metanarrative,” or Christianity’s “Great Story,” is one of the foundational pillars of our curriculum. The metanarrative forms the backbone not only of Holy Scripture, but also of the principal prayer in the Eucharist and of the Creeds. Appendix B introduces and defines the metanarrative (pages B.3–4) and shows how the metanarrative is the structure for the Eucharistic Prayer (B.5–6), reflected in the Nicene Creed (B.7), and how it is the Great Story of Holy Scripture (B.8–15). We urge you to take time this week to introduce yourself to the metanarrative. We suggest you begin with pages B.3–4 and B.8. Following that, you may want to notice other aspects of the metanarrative. The book of Revelation is found on pages B.15. We will discuss the metanarrative next Sunday morning, and refer to it from time to time in our study.

Materials

Next week please bring your Bible, your participant’s guide, your appendix, a pen or pencil, and any reflections, questions, or experiences from your times of Personal Study that you would be willing to share.

The Lion as the Lamb

PERSONAL STUDY

STUDY 1 — OPENING THE SCROLL WITH THE SEVEN SEALS

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 6:1–8:5

30 to 40 minutes

Introduction. Up to this point in our reading of Revelation, we have already encountered some unusual imagery and strange scenes, and yet most of what has taken place is generally understandable. That is, while we have not necessarily understood what each symbol, number, or image is intended to convey or evoke, the general movement of the narrative has been relatively straightforward. Unfortunately, this increasingly ceases to be the case beginning with what follows in Rev 6 and most of the rest of the book. The imagery, symbolism, and scenes will certainly make some sense, but their meaning becomes somewhat more difficult to access, in large part because what follows does not always occur in sequential order. In order to reduce confusion and provide clarity, we will take time each week in the first personal study to identify the structure of the given week's reading, discussing how its parts cohere as well as how it relates to what has gone before and to what will follow.

Review and Preview. In Rev 1:1–8, John greets his readers and communicates his purposes in writing. In Rev 1:9–20, John recounts his inaugural vision of Jesus as the heavenly Son of Man, who instructs John to send seven messages to the seven churches, which are found in Rev 2–3. In Rev 4–5, John is transported in the spirit to heaven where he witnesses the hosts of heaven offering worship to the one seated upon the throne (God) and to the Lamb who was slaughtered (Jesus). What follows next is the large, central portion of Revelation (Rev 6–16), which is structured around three series of seven “judgments” each — those of the seven seals, of the seven trumpets, and of the seven bowls. These three sets of judgments are linked in the following way: the opening of the seventh and last seal of the scroll introduces a new series of seven, the seven trumpets; likewise, the blowing of the seventh trumpet introduces the last series of seven, the seven bowls.

Revelation 6:1–8:5. Our study this week is taken up with the opening of the seven seals and so some introductory comments. First of all, it is important to understand how this section relates to what has gone before. In this section, as the Lamb Jesus goes through the process of opening a scroll by breaking each of its seven seals in turn. The scroll being opened is the same scroll John saw in the right hand of the one seated upon the throne (5:1). As it turns out, only the Lamb who was slaughtered is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll, whose contents, as we shall see later, contain God's secret plans for establishing empire on the earth and also includes the means by which God's people will participate in bringing this about. As we shall see, the breaking of each seal is accompanied by an event, but — and this is a very important point to understand and keep in mind — the events that accompany the seal-openings are not the contents of the scroll itself. The scroll's contents are not able to be re-



vealed until all the seals have been broken, and it will not be until Rev 11ff. that the contents of the scroll will be disclosed; ~~this disclosure of the scroll's contents will not occur until after Rev 10.~~ And so, the events that accompany the opening of each seal must not be confused with God's purposes as contained in the scroll, these events simply prepare the reader for the revelation of the contents.

Here I think I should bring in a few things from the second study

1. In one sitting, read through Revelation 6:1–8:5
2. Journal any of your observations, questions, thoughts, or reflections.

Journal



The Lion as the Lamb

STUDY 2 — THE OPENING OF THE FIRST FOUR SEALS

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 6:1–8

20 to 30 minutes

In today's personal study, we look more closely at the images that accompany the Lamb's opening of the first four of the scroll's seven seals. Here we encounter one of the most recognized and enduring images of Revelation — the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. With the opening of each seal, John hears one of the four living creatures thunder, "Come!" and then John sees a horse and its rider. Each horse is of a different color and each rider is described differently, the colors and descriptors being visualizations of what each rider represents.

The first rider represents/symbolizes invasion, the second civil strife/war and rebellion, and the third economic hardship and/or famine. Finally, the fourth rider is Death, who is accompanied by Hades. Death and Hades represent pestilence and at the same time function as the culmination of the devastation wrought by the first three riders.

Before proceeding, we do well to remember a point emphasized in the previous personal study, namely, that the events and scenes which accompany the opening of each of the seven seals do not comprise the contents of the scroll. The scroll cannot be opened nor its contents disclosed until all of the seals have been broken. And as we shall see, the contents of the scroll are not made known until chapter 10 when the opened scroll is brought down from heaven and literally consumed by John. This distinction between the events that accompany the opening of the seven seals and the contents of the scroll itself is an important distinction to maintain. If these are confused one is apt to conclude that the death and destruction of human life via invasion, civil war/strife, economic hardship, and pestilence are the means by which God intends to bring about God's purposes for the redemption of the nations and the restoration of all creation.

1. Read through Rev 6:1–8 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing down your responses can be a very beneficial practice.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?



❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.

The Lion as the Lamb

STUDY 3 — THE OPENING OF THE FIFTH AND SIX SEALS

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 6:9–17

20 to 30 minutes

Today we pick up where we left off in the previous personal study; we move from the opening of the first four seals, each of which were accompanied by one of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, to the opening of the fifth and sixth seals. The events that accompany the opening of the fifth and sixth seals are markedly different than what accompanied the opening of the first four seals.

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees beneath the heavenly altar the souls of martyrs as they cry out to God inquiring about when God will exercise judgment upon the inhabitants of the earth so that their deaths will be avenged. Given that the martyrs are located under the altar — the place of sacrifice — their deaths are portrayed as a sacrifice.

When the sixth seal is opened a whole range of cosmic and cataclysmic events are witnessed: an earthquake, an eclipse, shooting stars, etc. The sky is portrayed as a scroll being rolled up, so now the barrier that had separated and thereby protected the inhabitants of a most unholy world from the gaze and presence of the most holy God has been removed. Fear and dread fall upon the earth's inhabitants, and they seek places to hide for the great day of the wrath of God and of the Lamb has come.

In order to better grasp what is going on with the opening of these seals, it is worth trying to come to some understanding of the relationship between these first six seals. But before addressing that issue, it is important to reiterate once again the following point: the events that accompany the opening of the seals is not to be confused with the contents of the scroll, which can only be disclosed after all seven seals have been opened. Thus, we are to understand the events of the seals as anticipatory to the revelation of the scroll's contents and these events prepare the reader for the disclosure of the scroll's contents.

So what is the relationship between the events that accompany the opening of the seals, and how do these events (or scenes) anticipate and prepare the reader for the revelation of God's secret purposes as contained in the scroll?

In the previous study we noted that the four horsemen of the Apocalypse reflect the characteristics of a world, a world which in its political, social, and economic spheres is opposed to God and God's vision for creation. In a world whose systems and structures of power are at enmity with God, the people of God, if they live as the people of God, will inevitably undergo attack, persecution, and, in a world like imperial Rome, death. It is likely then that the martyrs portrayed under the altar (seal 5) are the result of a world characterized by the four horsemen. These martyrs cry out for justice and vengeance, and seemingly in response to this outcry, the Lamb opens the sixth seal, which is accompanied by all manner of cosmic upheaval, which serve as warning signs that God is about to establish his just reign on the earth which always presupposes judgment upon evil and injustice. These cosmic signs are not the great day of wrath itself, only signs of its imminence. And so it would seem that the day of wrath, as anticipated in the cosmic events that accompany the opening of the sixth seal, is in



direct response to the martyrs' cry "How long. . . ?" and is directed at a fallen world and its power structures that carry out violence upon God's people.

One of the questions we will want to keep in mind in the weeks ahead is what exactly the purpose of God's wrath and how does it relate to the as-of-yet undisclosed secret purposes of God as contained within the scroll.

1. Read through Rev 6:9–17 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing your responses can be a very beneficial practice.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

The Lion as the Lamb

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.



OPENING

:05

Welcome and Prayer

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray.

Silence

Gracious God, we thank you for the privilege of reading, reflecting, and praying over the Scriptures in a small group community; we pray you open us to the presence of your Holy Spirit in the Scripture and in us, through Christ our Lord. *Amen*

Overview of the Session

We begin this morning by sharing experiences of the Holy Spirit, and then we turn to our reflections from our personal study and John's vision of the heavenly throne room. In our group study, we continue in this scene of heavenly worship by looking more closely at the juxtaposition of images of Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb. Finally, we close with looking ahead at our personal studies this week, which show how God's people are called to participate in God's victory over evil.

LEARNING COMMUNITY

:50

LIFE SHARING

Sharing Our Stories

15 minutes

1. What was one thing you did in your free time when you were growing up?
2. What is one thing you do in your free time now?

Reflections from Personal Study

15 minutes

In last past week's personal studies, we looked at a scene of from the heavenly throne room wherein worship—properly understood as something due to God and God alone—is offered both to the One seated upon the throne (God) and to the Lamb (Jesus).

- ❖ Do you have any questions about our method of reading, praying, and studying the Bible or about the metanarrative in Appendix B?
- ❖ Do you have any questions, reflections, or experiences from your personal study that you would be willing to share?



The Army of Martyrs

GROUP STUDY

Introduction

2 minutes

Today's passage is comprised of two contrasting scenes, or images. In the first, John hears the number of those being marked with God's seal, 144,000 from the tribes of Israel. In the second, John sees standing before the throne and the Lamb an innumerable multitude comprised from every nation, from all tribes, peoples, and languages. Without going into the details, the 144,000 are to be understood as a messianic army whereas the innumerable multitude are those faithful witnesses who were put to death during the great ordeal. What then is the relationship between the 144,000 and the multitude?

In last week's group study, we saw how John forged a new symbol of conquest, conquest by means of sacrificial death. John forged this new symbol of conquest by juxtaposing the militaristic image of the Messiah as the Lion of Judah with the sacrificial image of the slaughtered Lamb. In today's passage, we find a similar technique at work. Just as John heard reference made to the Lion of Judah and yet saw the slaughtered sacrificial Lamb so also John hears the number of the messianic army, the 144,000 of Israel, and yet sees an innumerable, international multitude of martyrs. Thus, the same way that John has transformed the traditional image of the Messiah as a military leader into that of a sacrificial victim, so also has John transformed the traditional image of the followers of the Messiah. No longer are they portrayed as carrying out a military campaign; instead their role has become one of faithful witness in the face of persecution, of active, nonviolent resistance in the face of injustice. Though John has maintained the militaristic language of conquering and of conquest, he has effectively transformed it and invested it with new meaning; the messianic army remains an army, an army of martyrs.

Personal Engagement — Revelation 7:4–17

6 minutes

- ❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing? Does this passage raise any questions for me?

- ❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

- ❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?



Community Engagement — Revelation 7:4–17

Sharing Our Personal Responses

- ❖ Observation
- ❖ Attraction
- ❖ Response

CLOSING

:05

Looking Ahead

Anticipate how this army of martyrs fits into the secret, yet to be disclosed plans of God contained in the scroll.

Materials

Next week please bring your Bible, your participant's guide, your appendix, a pen or pencil, and any reflections, questions, or experiences from your times of Personal Study that you would be willing to share.

The Army of Martyrs

PERSONAL STUDY

STUDY 1 — THE SEVEN SEALS OPENED BY THE LAMB

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 6:1–8:5

30 to 40 minutes

Perspective,

Introduction

1. In one sitting, read through Revelation 4:1–5:14



Journal



STUDY 2 —

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 6:9–17

20 to 30 minutes

Introduction

1. Read through Rev 6:9–17 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing down your responses can be a very beneficial practice.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

The Army of Martyrs

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.



STUDY 3 —

Prayer

5 minutes

Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit for the grace, mercy, and guidance you want and need, knowing that you are in the presence of God. Tell God that it is your desire and intention to be with God as best as you can. Offer yourself to God, *realize that this is indeed the best you can do and that God fully accepts you right now as you are*, and ask God to speak to you through the text. If you have trouble focusing or concentrating when you begin, that's okay; go ahead and begin; let your reading help to focus you.

Study — Revelation 3:7–13

20 to 30 minutes

Introduction

1. Read through Rev 6:9–17 to get an overall sense of what is going on in this passage. Then reread the passage a few more times, each time reading more slowly and deliberately with the goal of entering into the passage more deeply.
2. As you read respond to the following questions. Writing your responses can be a very beneficial practice.

❖ What do I observe? What am I seeing?

❖ Does this passage raise any questions for me?

❖ What is attracting me positively or negatively in this passage? Why is it attracting me?

The Army of Martyrs

❖ What response is emerging within me? What is my response to what is attracting me?

Reflection

5 to 10 minutes

Spend a few moments writing down any thoughts, feelings, experiences, or insights that came to you during this time. End your time by thanking God for being present, whether you “felt” God’s presence or not.



The Army of Martyrs

