

**cover to
cover**
Bible Study

7 Sessions for Homegroup
and Personal Use

Revelation

4-22

The Lamb wins!
Christ's final victory

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CWR

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Introduction

Most of the book of Revelation (despite its title, which means ‘unveiling’) remains a mystery to many. We are familiar with chapters 1 to 3 (letters to the seven churches) but few of us venture further. It is through that neglected territory (unique in the New Testament) that these studies are designed to guide us.

We may take comfort from the fact that we are not the only people to have found Revelation difficult. For years the Church hesitated to include it in the full canon of Scripture – even Martin Luther would have omitted it from the New Testament! Moreover, once its place was firmly established, over-fanciful and wildly dogmatic interpretations deterred many Christians from persevering with it.

As we remedy that situation in these studies, we consider first some introductory questions about this book. Its opening verses (Rev. 1:1,4,9) state it to be by ‘John’, traditionally believed to have been John the Apostle – and these studies assume that to be the case. There are both reasons to support that view and difficulties in the way of it, and those interested in such questions should consult the commentaries. No one can be really certain either way. In the case of this particular book, however, who wrote it is of little consequence: its real author is Christ Himself (Rev. 1:1; 22:16). It is a ‘revelation of Jesus Christ’, and as we read we must constantly look for what it teaches us about Him.

We have already noted that the book of Revelation is unique in the New Testament. We are familiar with the Gospels (recording the ministry and teaching of Jesus); the Acts of the Apostles (describing the infant Church and the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles); and the Epistles (letters by Paul and others to churches and

individuals dealing with questions arising in the life of the Early Church). But what about Revelation? It is a mixture of different forms of writing, comprising epistle (Rev. 1:1–4,11), prophecy (Rev. 1:1–3; 22:7,10,18–19) and what is called ‘apocalyptic’. Apocalyptic was a form of writing that flourished in the first century AD (though there are Old Testament examples of it in Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah) and is characterised by a background of persecution, a recurring use of visions, pictures and numbers and frequent references back to the Old Testament. The danger when reading such literature is to try to interpret every symbol literally or historically. John is a word-artist, and we should see his book not so much as a photograph of future events, but more like an abstract painting whose truth and power lie not in the meaning of every detailed brush stroke but in the overall effect as we stand back and let the whole picture make its impact upon us. Whereas in Old Testament apocalyptic the visions and symbols are almost always interpreted, in Revelation there is a marked absence of explanation. While we shall certainly want to wrestle with some detailed interpretation, our main goal will be to see the overall picture of what this book has to teach us.

The book of Revelation was written at a time when the Church was in conflict with the pagan, secular state and was undergoing terrible persecution. It was meant to offer encouragement to its first readers in that historical setting. To confine its application to that period, however, is to limit the book’s usefulness. Conversely, to see it as prophesying wholly future events still centuries ahead (some claim to see Napoleon, Hitler, the Arab–Israeli conflict and even the European Union in its pages) is to render it irrelevant to the first-century Church. Clearly a right understanding of Revelation needs it to apply to every Christian in every culture and in every age. Thus, perhaps one of the most important keys to understanding this book is to recognise that the visions it describes are

parallel rather than consecutive pictures of the whole sweep of Christian history from the first to the second coming of Christ.

During a recent visit to Prague I was reminded of a story I heard told by Dr H Eddie Fox, World Director of Evangelism for the World Methodist Council, at a conference in Singapore. Under the Communist regime in former Czechoslovakia the authorities sought to suppress the work of the churches by refusing permission for any external church signs or the ringing of church bells. In 1989, however, the Czech people decided enough was enough and what was termed 'the Velvet Revolution' began. They walked out of their jobs, schools and homes and stood silently with their dream of freedom. They determined that on 27 November at 12 noon they would ring the church bells, and as the bell of the Methodist church in Prague rang out the pastor's wife suggested they should also erect a sign outside the church. It read 'The Lamb wins!'

That in a nutshell is the message of the book of Revelation. Its grand theme is the ultimate victory of God and His Church over Satan and all his allies. As Revelation 17:14 puts it: 'They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings.' If our studies help us to grasp that truth, however much or little other detail we understand, they will be well worthwhile.

WEEK 1

The Lamb upon the Throne

Opening Icebreaker

Who is the most famous person you have ever met, and what is the most awe-inspiring building you have ever visited? Has anyone met a member of the royal family, or visited Buckingham Palace? What pictures come to mind when you hear the words ‘royal throne’?

Bible Reading

Revelation 4:1–5:14





Opening Our Eyes

As John in his vision enters an open door into heaven, he sees something that is central not to these chapters only but to the whole of the book of Revelation: a Lamb seated upon the throne. At first, however, John simply says that ‘someone’ was sitting on the throne (Rev. 4:2). It is not clear who it is, though since he sits in great splendour and is clearly the object of unceasing worship by those surrounding the throne we may take this to be a picture of God Himself. Those who surround the throne include:

- *The twenty-four elders* (4:4) who may be symbolic of the whole people of God. The 12 patriarchs in the Old Testament and 12 apostles in the New (see also 21:12–14) represent both the old and new dispensations and include both Jews and Gentiles.
- *The four living creatures* (4:6–8 – cf. Ezek. 1:5ff) perhaps represent the whole created world – the lion being the king of wild beasts, the ox supreme among cattle, the eagle the king of birds and man the crown of God’s creation. All nature and the whole of humanity praise God!

At the beginning of Revelation 5 we are introduced to the picture of a sealed scroll (again with Old Testament echoes – see Ezek. 2:9–3:3), which we may see as symbolising God’s plan of salvation and His purposes for the destiny of the world. The fact that there is writing on both sides suggests that it is full and complete: no detail has been left out. But who is worthy to open it (Rev. 5:2)? God’s plan is so far unrevealed and unfulfilled, and John weeps in despair, for no mere mortal can unlock it.

Attention then turns to ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah’ (5:5) who is able to open the scroll; but as we look we see not a lion – but a Lamb (5:6,8,12–13). He had once been slain but is now very much alive. He still bears the

marks of crucifixion, but tragedy has turned to triumph. Here are meekness and majesty combined. The Lion is never mentioned again (indeed, this precise term is found nowhere else in Scripture), but the Lamb comes to the rescue. He alone is worthy to fulfil God's saving plan. Revelation 5:6 fills out the picture of the Lamb still further: He has seven horns (symbols of strength and honour – Deut. 33:17; Psa. 112:9) and seven eyes (symbols of knowledge – Zech. 4:10). Seven is a symbol of perfection and completeness, and (like other symbolic numbers) occurs many times in Revelation. Here it underlines the fact that the Lamb is all-powerful and all-knowing. No wonder He is 'worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals' (Rev. 5:9)!

So we come to one of the most dramatic moments in the whole book: as the Lamb takes the scroll He is enthroned with God the Father (5:7,13). This is nothing less than the coronation of the Saviour (Heb. 2:9), and the whole universe explodes with praise and worship (Rev. 5:9–14)!



Discussion Starters

1. How many hymns and worship songs can you think of that are based on the songs found in these two chapters?

2. John says he was ‘in the Spirit’ (4:2; cf.1:10) as he saw this vision. What do you think that means and is it an experience we too might have?

3. John tells us that a rainbow encircled the heavenly throne (4:3). How do other rainbows mentioned in Scripture (Gen. 9:13–15; Ezek. 1:28) help us to understand this picture?

4. Whenever worship is offered in these chapters the worshippers ‘fall down’ (Rev. 4:10; 5:8,14). What can this teach us about our own attitudes to worship?

5. In the ‘Opening Our Eyes’ section it was suggested that the ‘twenty-four elders’ (4:4) represented the whole people of God and the ‘four living creatures’ (4:6–8) the whole of creation. What alternative interpretations can you suggest?
