
THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE IN THE BIBLE

• STUDY GUIDE •
WITH LEADER'S NOTES

REVELATION

HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

SCOTTY SMITH

REVELATION: HOPE IN THE DARKNESS

Scotty Smith

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INTRODUCTION

The book of Revelation has suffered at the hands of its many interpreters through the years. Many simply want to treat the last book of the Bible as though it were a prophetic jigsaw puzzle, written to be solved for the final generation of Christians. Others dismiss it as being too veiled, complex, and culture-bound to be of any benefit to modern believers. Some so spiritualize the text as to render it little more than a book of parables and allegories.

In the early years of my life in Christ, I was exposed to a certain very detailed analysis of Revelation—and all the charts that came with it—which was presented as the one and only correct handling of the text. This particular school of interpretation led me and many of my young Christian friends to develop some wrong thinking and habits. I found myself spending too much time listening to the latest news reports in order to interpret biblical prophecy (I am still trying to find those Viet Cong helicopters in the text!). I was too taken up with end-times sensationalism.

I was also influenced to be far more preoccupied with Satan and the pervasiveness of evil than I was aware of our sovereign God, ruling over all things from his throne in heaven, and of the triumphant Lamb of God who came “to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). This led me to withdraw from my culture out of fear, into the false “safety” of an ingrown Christian subculture.

Lastly, the teaching I received on Revelation prompted me to develop an individualized spirituality. I had little understanding of the importance of the church and our corporate life as the people of God. Much of this was driven by fear and an inadequate view of the gospel. I remember receiving a lot of emphasis on being an overcomer through discipline and trying harder to please God. I

wasn't taught to trust boldly in Jesus and in his all-sufficient grace. Since I am a proud man who loves to perform, I became a Pharisee among Pharisees. Today, I'm a Pharisee in recovery.

I finally came to the point of giving up on the book of Revelation. It became a closed part of the Scripture to me for several years. It wasn't until I was prevailed upon for months (hounded is more like it!) to offer a study of the book of Revelation that I dared to venture back into this part of God's Word associated with so many bad memories.

However, an unbiased study of the text, along with good resourcing and research, led me literally to *see* Revelation in a whole new light. What a surprise our heavenly Father had in store for me as I sought to read and ponder it as though I were a part of the first community of faith in Asia Minor to receive John's series of visions! I have never enjoyed examining and teaching a portion of the Bible more than the year we spent working through this text. It was wonderful to rejoice with childlike wonder at what God was opening to us through his Scriptures.

These studies are the fruit of that discovery. I will share with you what we found to be both true and freeing.

Let me say at the outset that I offer nothing new or novel. No angel has appeared to me to reveal secrets others have missed. I make no claim to original thoughts or exegesis. Everything you will read in this study has been said before and with more precision. If that were not the case, I would be both crazy and presumptuous! My joy is simply to creatively restate these things for God's people of my generation.

I am also driven by a heartfelt concern for the hurting and biblically hungry people of God, and by their pronounced need for hope—a real, substantive hope. The older I have gotten as a Christian, husband, dad, son, friend, and pastor, the more I am constrained to conclude that life is hard, very hard. My own formula-based spirituality of the late '60s and '70s, with its principles and promises for “abundant living,” has faded into a more honest, if painful, understanding of the normal Christian life.

The theologically thin veneer of name-it-and-claim-it prosperity teaching (by which I was also influenced for a season) has been exposed for what it really is: a vain attempt to tame and control the sovereign purposes of Almighty God.

This is where God's good gift of hope comes in. In the Scriptures, hope is a present state of confidence based on the guarantee of a glorious future. To hope is to become so familiar with the future of God's story that it invades our daily lives now. By faith, we begin to smell the grass of the new heaven and new earth. The incomparable wonders of what is ahead for God's people are brought to bear upon our present, difficult circumstances, and mission opportunities. When our Lord returns, he will make all things new, beautiful, and right!

Such confidence frees Christians in every age and place to rejoice despite suffering and even to embrace suffering in the form of sacrificial love for God and others. "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Peter 1:6). Hope does not replace grief and trials; it wondrously transforms them.

I am convinced beyond all doubt that the last book in the Bible was written primarily to stimulate the people of God in every generation to *great hope*. This makes Revelation greatly accessible, deeply encouraging, and highly practical for how each of us lives today.

This book of overwhelming sights, nearly-audible sounds, and rich symbols is not just meant to bring eternal encouragement and liberating perspective in the final days before the coming of Jesus, nor is it just for the first-century church seeking to deal with the violent persecution of the Roman world. Rather, I have come to rejoice in the present hope offered to Christians of every generation by this timely and timeless book. Followers of the Lamb everywhere, and in all periods of church history, face struggles, fears, and heartaches similar to those of the first readers of Revelation. The setting and the circumstances vary, but spiritual warfare goes on wherever the people of God live. It is to the whole people of God that this book of hope is sent.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This study guide will help you study Revelation within a group. Studying with other believers in Christ lets you benefit from what God is also teaching them, and it gives you encouragement and accountability as you apply what you learn.

Like the other resources in this series, this study is gospel-centered. This means the study begins with an assumption that you have a daily need for the gospel. You have fears and insecurities and sins that the saving work of Jesus addresses, and by looking to the gospel you grow in love for Jesus and, in turn, a desire to love others and take the gospel out to them. With this in mind, the group will be a place to be open about sins and struggles with the goal of growing in Christ, gaining confidence as you see how he saves you in every way from that sin.

Each participant should have one of these study guides in order to join in reading and be able to work through the exercises during that part of the study. *The study leader should read through both the lesson and the leader's notes in the back of this book before each lesson begins.* Because Revelation is a lengthy book of the Bible, two lessons (lessons 7 and 11) require each participant to read a few chapters from Revelation on their own before arriving for the study. Otherwise, no preparation or homework is required.

There are fourteen lessons in this study guide. Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, perhaps a bit more if your group is large, and will include these elements:

BIG IDEA. This is a summary of the main point of the lesson.

BIBLE CONVERSATION. You will read a chapter or two from Revelation and discuss that passage. As the heading suggests, the

Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. In most cases, the questions will have several possible good answers and a few best answers. The leader's notes at the back of this book provide some insights, but don't just turn there for the "right answer." At times you may want to see what the notes say, but always try to answer for yourself first by thinking about the Bible passage.

ARTICLE. This is the main teaching section of the lesson, written by the book's author.

DISCUSSION. The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life. Again, there will be several good ways to answer each question.

EXERCISE. The exercise is a section you will complete on your own during group time. You can write in the book if that helps you. You will then share some of what you learned with the group. If the group is large, it may help to split up to share the results of the exercise and to pray, so that everyone has a better opportunity to participate.

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER. Prayer is a critical part of the lesson because your spiritual growth will happen through God's work in you, not by your self-effort. You will be asking him to do that good work.

This study guide is based on the author's contributions to the book, *Unveiled Hope: Eternal Encouragement from the Book of Revelation*, which the author wrote with Michael Card and first published in 1997. The articles, appendix, and the author's introduction and closing notes in this study guide consist mostly of condensed excerpts from that book. The discussions, exercises, and leader's notes all draw on that book as well. For further study, you may want to consult that entire work. It is available for purchase as an ebook at the New Growth Press website.

Lesson

1

A VISION OF JESUS

BIG IDEA

Our vision of Jesus tends to be too small. Revelation's purpose is not to give us a puzzle to figure out about Jesus, but to help us clarify and enlarge our vision of him in scary times.

BIBLE CONVERSATION *15 minutes*

In Revelation, seeing the point matters more than solving the puzzle. The book calls itself “the *revelation* of Jesus Christ.” The Greek word is *apokalypsis*, which means “unveiling” and refers to a fascinating type of literature. Apocalyptic writing in the Bible uses fanciful imagery to reveal to us what's really happening as we struggle in a world that seems trapped in evil's grip. Things are not simply as they appear to the naked eye. There is a bigger story in play, God's story of redemption and restoration. We are invited to engage our imagination, and our wonder at great spectacle, and see that God is at war with the devil and is certain to win this epic clash. So, God is using these vivid pictures to show us, in symbols, the deeper reality of how he is redeeming and restoring his world. He wants to arouse in us a child-like awe and confidence in our Savior.

Chapter 1 sets this up as a revelation from Jesus to the apostle John, who is on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea and in turn shares the revelation with seven churches on the nearby mainland of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. Fittingly, it begins with

a vision of Jesus himself. This is easily the most detailed physical description of Jesus found anywhere in the Bible. But of course, the point is not to show us what Jesus actually looks like physically. The meaning behind the description is where the true glory lies.

Have someone read **Revelation 1** aloud, or have several readers take turns. Then discuss the questions below:

Verse 3 says it will be a blessing for you to read and take to heart the words of Revelation. Think of what you just read. What part struck you as particularly helpful already, and why?

Revelation is thought of as a book about the future, but what do you find most encouraging about the things chapter 1 says Jesus has already done for us in the past? What's encouraging about who he is for us today, in the present?

Think about John's response to the vision of Jesus starting in verse 17, and Jesus's response to John. How closely does it resemble your relationship with Jesus, and how would you like your relationship with Jesus to become more like it?

Now read the following article, written by this book's author. Take turns reading it aloud, switching readers at each paragraph break. Then discuss the questions at the end of the article.

Lesson

1

ARTICLE

THE FOUNDATION OF ALL HOPE

5 MINUTES

One of the scariest moments of my life occurred when I was about six years old. Our family was vacationing on the Potomac River. One afternoon, as we decided to cross the big river in a small wooden ski boat, the sky suddenly became blacker than any I have seen before or since. The placid waters upon which I had learned to water ski that week became pitching waves, big enough to surf. What took my fears to an all-time high were the words spoken by the captain of our overcrowded and undersized craft: “We have little gas and no anchor.” The thought of being anchorless, adrift and helpless, caused raw terror.

It was on such a turbulent “sea” of confusion, fear, and uncertainty that the book of Revelation was written. John, the aged apostle, is in an involuntary exile on Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” Meanwhile on the mainland, the people of God are involved in a deadly conflict with the world. Intense spiritual warfare is escalating. Persecution is no longer occasional and local, but regular and widespread. And within the church’s gates, heresy, immorality, and worldliness are growing as the second century prepares to dawn.

At such a time, and to such a people, John writes of a Sovereign Lord and a Savior Lamb. There is no trace of panic, fear, or defeatism. Instead, there is encouragement, insight, worship, and hope! What do those believers, and we today, most need at this time and in every season of life? We need to see Jesus! He is our anchor! Until Jesus returns, life won't be without its storms, but we'll never experience a Christ-absent day.

To see Jesus is to have hope. His complete triumph over sin and all evil is the dominant theme of Revelation. Jesus is set forth as everything we need in life and in death, in prosperity and in adversity, in joy and in tribulation. John is making the point that the main question in life is “How big and how good is your Jesus?”

Consider what God wants us to know about our Savior in chapter 1 alone: Jesus is the “faithful witness.” We can trust him without hesitation, for he is the Word of God, truth incarnate. Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth”—right now, not in the distant future. We can be sure that our God reigns and has no rivals. And Jesus is “the firstborn from the dead” who “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” His resurrection guarantees ours. His shed blood secured our forever freedom. What greater comfort can be found than to know that the Lord of the universe has set his affection on us—even us! Jesus is the prophet, priest, and king we always wanted, and always needed—the Yes to every promise God has made.

As John ponders such love, he cannot help but think of the time when this outpouring of grace will be perfected in us. He who loves us is coming back for us! “Look, he is coming with the clouds, and ‘every eye will see him.’” For those who have received his grace, which flows so freely from the cross, there will be joy unspeakable: our sins, which kept Jesus on his tree of death even more than the nails did, have been forgiven, all of them!

It is important and comforting to notice that the first thing John sees is Jesus in the midst of his people, the church, represented by the seven golden lampstands. Jesus is with us and he is for us. John

goes on to describe Jesus in rich imagery and symbolism that is not meant to be painted, but rather to be pondered—scripturally. Two-thirds of the verses in Revelation contain at least one allusion to an Old Testament passage. The only “code language” John is using is that of God’s Word.

- The “son of man” in John’s vision is none other than the glorious persona described by the same name in Daniel 7:13. This is the title Jesus chose when referring to himself during his ministry. Deliverance from the Babylonian captivity was just a foreshadowing of the deliverance from sin that Jesus would win for us in fulfilling Daniel’s prophecies.
- John sees Jesus clothed with a robe, perhaps representative of both a king and a high priest. Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of lords, and he is the faithful and merciful high priest presiding over a throne of grace for the people of God! The golden sash speaks of his authority (see Exodus 28:8).
- The white hair is an expression of wisdom and the respect due him. This is none other than Daniel’s “Ancient of Days” (Daniel 7:9).
- The penetrating scrutiny of our Lord is symbolized by his eyes “like blazing fire.” His stability and strength are emphasized by his feet “like bronze glowing in a furnace.” John describes the voice he hears as having the might and authority of “rushing waters,” the very expression Ezekiel 1:24 uses to describe the voice of God.
- In Jesus’s right hand are the seven stars which represent the angels, or messengers, of the seven churches. Once again, we have a picture of the involvement and care our Lord gives to his people.
- The “doubled-edged sword” that issues from his mouth shows that his words are true and powerful. He speaks grace for his people and destruction for his enemies (see Isaiah 11:4).

- Lastly, the face of Jesus is seen in all of its overwhelming brilliance. “Like the sun,” his glory shines forth (see Malachi 4:2).

The hand of grace touches John as these great words of encouragement are spoken: “Do not be afraid”—the most repeated command in the Bible. That is all we need to hear from Jesus. History is moving inexorably toward God’s determined end. There are no contingency plans in heaven, no mere probabilities; no vexation, consternation, or Plan B. Everything is assured. This is neither fate nor karma. This is King Jesus. All we need is to see him, the biblical Jesus, the real Jesus. He is our anchor of hope, ocean of grace, and final destination.

DISCUSSION *10 MINUTES*

What troubles in the world today, or in your life, make you feel scared or defeated? What difference does it make to see that Jesus loves to encourage his people with the assurance that he is overcoming these troubles?

Think about the meanings behind the description of Jesus. Which aspect of him do you sometimes tend to overlook? How would it help you to notice that truth about Jesus more often?

Lesson

1

EXERCISE

FALSE IMAGES OF JESUS

20 MINUTES

All of us have been exposed to images of Jesus, either actual pictures or images in our minds, that fall short of the imagery presented in Revelation 1. Having a right view of Jesus begins with exposing these false images.

For this exercise, begin by working on your own. Read through the exercise and consider your responses, writing them down if that helps. When the group is ready, you'll have an opportunity to share some of your results.

Step 1. Think about some false images of Jesus. Be honest: which of them reflect the way you sometimes think about Jesus, even if you know better? Or which views do you encounter when you talk to others about Jesus?

- Shampoo-Advertisement Jesus
Clean and fresh, with sheen in his wavy hair. A good model. Inspires people to try to look their best, be their best, and feel their best.
- Coloring-Page Jesus
Flat and lifeless. Despite the familiar stories, has never come off the page and felt alive.

- ❑ Family-Movie Jesus
Nice guy with kind eyes. One-dimensional. Glides through the world spouting parables and using trance-like hand gestures to heal people while the crowd parts before him so his linen robes won't get wrinkled. Somehow above-the-fray. The last guy in the scene you'd expect to start swinging a sword.
- ❑ Vending-Machine Jesus
Put in enough payment, press the right buttons, and he might give you what you want. The buyer is in control, and what you can get matters more than the Giver.
- ❑ Store-at-the-Mall Jesus
One enticing option among many. A good choice for you if he fits your style.
- ❑ Motivational-Speaker Jesus
Presents easy tips for a successful life. Bids you follow him into comfort and hassle-free living, not sacrifice or repentance.
- ❑ Church-Statue Jesus
Old, dusty, and institutional. A relic from a bygone era. Interesting to look back on, but not very relevant when it comes to daily life in our times.
- ❑ Darth Vader Jesus
Represents the evil empire of "organized religion." Potentially damaging. Once a good guy, maybe, but now a symbol of repressive attitudes and hurtful influence.
- ❑ Santa Claus Jesus
Supposedly a good guy, but always checking up on who's been naughty or nice. Inclined to withhold his gifts if he sees how naughty you've been. Comes around now and then but mostly stays distant, not actually helping you become nicer.

- Disguised-as-Moses Jesus
More often seen carrying stone tablets of law than a cross of redemptive love.
- Clay-Figure Jesus
Moldable. Always fits who you think he should be. Repeatedly shaped into any viewpoint or political cause you like. Never shapes you.
- Other: _____

Step 2. Consider how the imagery in Revelation 1 is a good correction to these false images. What true imagery of Jesus is especially important to notice so we can combat our false images?

I wish people I know would see that Jesus is _____
_____.

I personally need to see that Jesus is _____
_____.

When the group is ready, share some of your responses. What richer view of Jesus is big enough to support you in both world-shaking times and world-changing tasks?

WRAP-UP AND PRAYER *10 MINUTES*

Truth is a gift from God. As part of your prayer time together, ask that the Holy Spirit guide you as you study and help you to see the true Jesus clearly, and to worship him as John did.