

THE INTERPRETATION BIBLE STUDIES LEADER HELPS

REVELATION

The IBS Leader Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of instructional methods that have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process.

Each participant in the group should have a copy of IBS study book and should make a commitment to do advance preparation for each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those which are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

Read Revelation in its entirety before beginning to teach. It is important to familiarize yourself with the book's overall content, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.

Skim through the whole study book to discern its flow. This is especially helpful if there are multiple teachers, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next unit.

Prepare the room ahead of time. For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semi-circular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as the "authority."

Secure necessary teaching aids. A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset, and these sessions assume that newsprint will be used. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to display the sheets for future reference. Maps of the Holy Land in New Testament times would be very helpful, as would maps showing the location of the seven churches addressed in Revelation. Check the teaching suggestions for other materials necessary for certain units.

Prepare necessary handouts. Invite the participants to provide a folder for each handouts.

Keep the key idea in mind. Understand the purpose and goal of each activity.

Pray for God's guidance. Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Unit 1: The Call to Keep What Is Written (Revelation 1:1–5, 9)

Key Idea: Revelation is about revealing Jesus Christ, not about revealing clues regarding the end of the world.

Advance Preparation

Prepare a sheet of newsprint with the heading, “Revelation.”

For your own background information, look up *apocalyptic*, *inspiration*, and *revelation* in a Bible or theological dictionary:

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Use Revelation 1:1–8 as a litany prayer. Begin with, “Let us pray.” Continue by having the leader and participants alternate verses to the end. Close by saying, “In Jesus’ name,” followed by a group “Amen.”

2. Introducing the Student Book

If you have not done so before, hand out the student books. Spend a little time going over the format of the units. Suggest that a useful practice is to begin the reading of each unit with the “Questions for Reflection” section, found at the end of the unit. These offer a clue to the writer’s intention and help direct one’s reading. Give the class a few minutes to quickly read through the introduction and the first unit, keeping track of any initial questions.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Sharing Opinions about the Book of Revelation

Invite people to share their ideas and perceptions about the Book of Revelation. What have they heard? What do they know about it? What do they think it’s about? How many believe that it predicted accurately the rise of Hitler and other modern, historical events? How many think it accurately predicts the end of the world? Keep track of the responses on the prepared newsprint. Save the sheet for use at the end of the course to see if opinions have changed.

4. *What's in a Name?*

Discuss the following:

- Why is it inaccurate to speak of this book as the “Revelation of John”? Whose revelation is it?
- What, in general, is being revealed?
- What is the difference between saying the “Revelation of John” and the “Revelation to John”?

5. *John: Theologian, Poet, Pastor*

Divide the class into three groups. Have the first group look at “John the Theologian” on p. 9 in the study book, the second look at “John the Poet” on p. 10, and the third look at “John the Pastor” on p. 11. Then have each group try to convince the others that John is primarily whatever their section of the study book said (that is, a theologian, a poet, or a pastor). John is all three, of course, but this method should help the group understand better his complexity.

6. *A Principle of Interpretation*

Point out that one principle of interpretation is “always assume that the text made sense to its first hearers.” Ask: How does this principle serve as a hedge against interpretations claiming that Revelation predicts what has happened in recent history in the contemporary world?

Exploration (20 minutes)

7. *Questions for Reflection*

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 13 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Response (10 minutes)

8. *Advice and Comfort for Persecuted Christians*

Note that the pastoral letter called “Revelation” was written to Christian churches in Asia Minor who were suffering great persecution for their beliefs and practice. Ask the class, “If you were writing to persecuted Christians today in, say, the Middle East, Asia, or some other location, what four things would you say to them?” After people have worked individually for a few minutes, have them report to the entire group. Record their responses on newsprint.

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” O Lord, help us to realize these blessings in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

10. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 2 and Revelation 1:12–20. Have them also think about how this description of Christ squares with their own. Ask: How would you describe Christ?

Unit 2: One in the Midst of the Lampstands (Revelation 1:12–20)

Key Idea: In a world of trouble and persecutions, where we feel at the mercy of other forces, Jesus stands in our midst, calling us to keep the faith and to witness to his Lordship by resisting the powers of oppression and injustice.

Advance Preparation

Provide paper, crayons, markers, and clay for the participants. For your own background information, look up *Son of God* and *Son of Man* in a Bible or theological dictionary.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

In the splendor of the vision of Christ, O Lord, we see your face, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, holy and righteous, just and merciful, from everlasting to everlasting. Restore to us the joy of your salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. The Vision of Christ

Have the participants take a sheet of paper, turn it sideways, and draw a line dividing the paper into two halves. Ask them to write “Mark 10:13–16” on the left side, and “Rev. 1:12–16” on the right. Next, invite them to turn to Mark 10:13–16 and draw a picture of Jesus as represented there. Then have them turn to Rev. 1:12–16 and draw a picture or representation of Jesus as presented there.

Ask everyone to compare the pictures. Ask:

- What are the differences? What are the major features of each picture and what do they represent?
- Which would bring more comfort or empowerment to Christians suffering persecution?
- Which is more appealing to you?
- Which is the true Jesus?

4. Jesus in the Midst of the Lampstands

Ask the following:

- What is the significance of Jesus standing in the midst of the lampstands (the churches)?
- Think of a current situation in which this image would fit. If you cannot, what does that say about the church today?

5. Silencing the Church

Have participants brainstorm ways the world tries to silence the church today when we want to call attention to injustice and oppression. Then point out that the message in Revelation is not about what will happen in the future but that Christ is Lord! The world resisted that message when John wrote Revelation. Ask: What are some of the ways people, communities, and nations resist the message today?

Exploration (20 minutes)

6. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 22 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Response (10 minutes)

7. Taking Unpopular Stands

Invite the group to describe any unpopular stands your church has taken in the name of Christ, especially with regard to racial or gender justice, the poor, or caring for “unpopular” or “socially unacceptable” people. Ask: How does this compare with other churches you know about?

Then invite the participants to draw a picture or sculpt a figure representing some perhaps unpopular but justified stand your church could take in your community. (Or, have them call out ideas that you record on newsprint.) Ask: What would it take to get our church to do each of these things? Record the responses on newsprint.

You may also want to have the participants outline a concrete plan for getting one or more of these ministries implemented. Once the plan is discussed, assigned a member or group from the class to take the ideas to your pastor or church board.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Lord, let us find these blessings in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 3 and Revelation 2—3. Have them also consider the question: What do you think about angels?

Unit 3: Of Angels and Churches (Revelation 2—3)

Key Idea: These letters bear the word of Christ to seven churches in Asia Minor (and to us), offering genuine affirmation, correction, and promise.

Advance Preparation

Provide paper and pens or pencils for the participants.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray Rev. 2:2–7 as a litany prayer. Begin with, “Let us pray.” Continue by having the leader and participants alternate verses to the end. Close by saying, “In Jesus’ name,” followed by a group “Amen.”

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Have participants turn to the Questions for Reflection on p. 31 in the study book and discuss questions 1 and 3.

Exploration (25 minutes)

4. All Politics Are Local

On p. 26, the study book refers to Tip O’Neill’s aphorism, “All politics are local.” Call this statement to the attention of the group, and ask:

- What do you understand this to mean? Do you agree? Why or why not? (Give examples.)
- What about saying “All religion is local”? Would you agree or disagree with this? Why?
- What about Jesus’ words? Do they speak only locally? What difference does one’s answer to this question make?

5. The Divine Authority

Note that each of the letters in Revelation follows the prophetic tradition of claiming divine authority by saying “These are the words of the Lord,” or words to that effect. (The prophets usually said, “Thus says the Lord.”) Ask:

- How do you react when someone makes that claim today, either in person, in print, or on television? If someone tries to clinch an argument by saying “Thus says the Lord,” are you more or less likely to be convinced?
- There are many disagreements in the church over various theological and social issues. In most cases, people base their opinion on the Bible. Given this, why are the principles of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) of the utmost importance if we are to live in some harmony in the church?

6. *We Shall Be Conquerors*

Point out that each of the letters asserts a promise that those who remain faithful shall be conquerors. Ask:

- How do you define “conquerors?”
- The study book says that the definition of conquering is set by the risen Christ who speaks the promise (p. 30). He has conquered through suffering and death. To conquer may mean to be aligned with him, even in his suffering and death. What appeal (if any) does such a definition of conquering and such a prospect have for most affluent North American Christians?

Response (10 minutes)

7. *Writing a Letter to the Angel of Your Church*

These letters were written to the angel of each church. The *angel* refers to the corporate personality or soul of the individual church. The letters are thus specific about affirmation, correction, and promise.

Invite the class to write such a letter to the angel of *your* church, determining the affirmations, corrections, and promises they want to convey. As a guide, have participants use the question on p. 25 in the study book: “What do you hear God saying in affirmation, correction, and promise to your community?”

Pass out paper and pens, and allow time for everyone to jot down some thoughts on this. Then, collect the letters and explain that during the week you will combine all the suggestions into one large letter to the church. You may want to have this letter printed in your church newsletter or bulletin, or perhaps post it on a prominent bulletin board for all to see.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Let us pray. Our Lord said, “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Let us find this blessing in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 4 and review Revelation 2—3. Have them also think about the question: What is the image and view of Christ in each letter?

Unit 4: “I Know Your Works” (Revelation 2—3)

Key Idea: Christ the Lord controls destiny, not the other way around.

Advance Preparation

For your own background information, look up *perseverance* in a Bible or theological dictionary.

On a sheet of newsprint, make two columns. Label one “Church” and the other “Image.” In the “Church” column, list the names of the seven churches addressed in Rev. 2—3.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

The Spirit says to the churches, “I know your works—your love, faith, service and patient endurance.” “To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 43 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. Various Images for Christ

Note that each of the seven letters in Rev. 2—3 begins with a vivid image for Christ. The image for the church at Ephesus, for instance, is someone who holds seven stars in his right hand and walks among seven golden lampstands.

Divide the class into two subgroups, assigning four of the letters to one subgroup, and three to the other. Have each subgroup identify the images in their assigned letters and discuss what they mean. Ask: What relevance does each image have for the church today?

On the prepared newsprint, record each image by the corresponding church name as the participants report on them. When all are listed, invite the entire group to reflect on these images of Christ. Ask:

- Taken together, what do these images say about the early church's view of Christ?
- How do you feel about these images?
- What is left out? What would you add?
- Which are the most significant to you and why? Which are the least significant to you and why?

5. The Power of Christ

Point out that each of the images discussed in the previous step is meant to say something about Christ and his power. Ask:

- In what ways are these images meaningful representations of Christ and his power?
- What do these images suggest about Christ's control over destiny?
- What is your own understanding of Christ's control over destiny? What difference does this make in your life?

Response (10 minutes)

6. The Slippery Slope

The study book says on p. 35 that in many of these churches some were seeking a mediating way between the ethical and purity standards of their faith and the demands of social and economic life. The author writes, "The issue is that at some point accommodation becomes a slippery slope that leads to the complete undermining of faithfulness." Ask:

- How does that happen in contemporary Christian life?
- What are the specific accommodations that we modern, North American Christians make?
- What examples can you point to of the church's being on a "slippery slope" to unfaithfulness?
- How does this relate, if at all, to the discussion regarding Christ's control over destiny?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.” In the week to come, let us be the salt of the earth. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

8. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 5 and Revelation 4—5. Have them also consider this question: What does it mean to “worship” something?

Unit 5: The Heavenly Worship (Revelation 4—5)

Key Idea: The elders, angels, and creatures around the throne represent the well-ordered heavenly place, which is centered on God.

Advance Preparation

Read Genesis 22. Think about how Isaac’s willing acceptance of being sacrificed compares to the sacrifice of Christ, the lamb of God.

Provide hymnals for the participants.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray Rev. 5:1–14 as a litany prayer. Begin with, “Let us pray.” Continue by having the leader and participants alternate verses to the end. Close by saying, “In Jesus’ name,” followed by a group “Amen.”

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Setting the Scene

On a sheet of newsprint write “A Time for Opening Seals.” Invite the class to list the elements and cast of characters in Rev. 5:1–14.

Invite people to ask questions about the scene regarding items that may confuse them. Let the class, working with the study book, answer as many of these as they can.

Then ask: What is going on here? What is the significance of the lamb being the one to open the seals rather than the lion?

4. The Text and Its First Hearers

The study book says on p. 45 that the throne language was inherently political, rooted in the first hearers’ contemporary experience. Note the four examples given on p. 45, and then invite the participants to rewrite these in contemporary terms based on the political system of the United States.

Exploration (20 minutes)

5. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 52 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Response (10 minutes)

6. Hymn Study

The study book lists on p. 50–51 the five hymns that appear in the text of Rev. 4—5.

Divide the group into five subgroups, and pass out the hymnals. Have each subgroup take one of the hymns on p. 50–51 and find similar hymns in the hymnal. When each group is done, have them share their findings with the entire class.

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Lord, let us be the light of the world in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

8. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 6 and Revelation 6:1–17; 8:1–5.

Unit 6: The Seals of History (Revelation 6:1–17; 8:1–5)

Key Idea: The pattern of history—repeating itself over and over again—is conquest, war, famine, pestilence, and death. Only Christ can deliver us from these evil powers.

Advance Preparation

Read Habakkuk 3:4–15 and Zechariah 6:1–10. Make copies of the following handout for use in step 5.

Biblical References to the Shattered Universe in Revelation 6:12–17

Psalm 13:1

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?

Isaiah 13:3

I myself have commanded my consecrated ones,
have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones,
to execute my anger.

Isaiah 34:4

All the host of heaven shall rot away,
and the skies roll up like a scroll.
All their host shall wither
like a leaf withering on a vine,
or fruit withering on a fig tree.

Isaiah 50:3

I clothe the heavens with blackness,
and make sackcloth their covering.

Ezekiel 32:7

When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens,
and make their stars dark;
I will cover the sun with a cloud,
and the moon shall not give its light.

Ezekiel 38:19

For in my jealousy and in my blazing wrath I declare:
On that day there shall be a great shaking in the land of Israel . . .

Joel 2:10

The earth quakes before them,
 the heavens tremble.
 The sun and the moon are darkened,
 and the stars withdraw their shining.

Joel 2:31

The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood,
 before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

Amos 8:8

Shall not the land tremble on this account,
 and everyone mourn who lives in it,
 and all of it rise like the Nile,
 and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?

Haggai 2:6

For thus says the LORD of hosts:
 Once again, in a little while,
 I will shake the heavens and the earth
 and the sea and the dry land . . .

Matthew 24:29

Immediately after the suffering of those days
 the sun will be darkened,
 and the moon will not give its light;
 the stars will fall from heaven,
 and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

Mark 13:24

But in those days, after that suffering,
 the sun will be darkened,
 and the moon will not give its light . . .

Opening (10 minutes)*1. Prayer*

Read Psalm 79 as a litany prayer. Begin with, "Let us pray." Continue by having the leader and participants alternate verses to the end. Close by saying, "In Jesus' name," followed by a group "Amen."

2. *Leftovers*

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*

Invite the group to share any opinions they may have about the four horsemen of the apocalypse.

Divide the group into four subgroups. Assign each one of the four horses: the white, the red, the black, and the pale. Invite everyone to look at Zechariah 1:7–11 and 5:1–8, and at Habakkuk 3:4–15. Let each subgroup, using the study book and the Bible, identify each horse and rider and what each might mean. Have them report to the larger group when ready.

Then ask: What might the passage as a whole mean? Remind them that some interpreters say that the white horse stands for conquest. Discuss the significance of this. Ask: Does this change your view of the text at all? If so, how?

4. *The Cry of the Martyrs*

Have the participants compare Revelation 6:9–11 with Psalm 79. Invite the group to express their feelings about the degree of vengeance called for.

Note that some interpreters have argued that the early church faced two great enemies (symbolized in Revelation by the sea beast and the land beast): the might of the Roman Empire and the organization of emperor worship. The writer of Revelation seems to be saying that the church cannot defeat Roman military power (and should not use force in any case to advance the love of God) but can defeat Roman religion through steadfastness and loyalty, even to the point of martyrdom. Have the participants discuss this proposal. Ask: What is often the effect of martyrs, people willing to die for their faith? What, in fact, did happen with regard to these two powers facing the early church?

5. *A Shattered Universe*

Pass out copies of the handout, “Biblical References for the Shattered Universe in Revelation 6:12–17.” Have people underline the figures that also appear in Revelation 6:12–17.

Ask: What do these vivid images say about the biblical prophet’s view of the judgment of God upon the evils of the world? Compare this with Genesis 6:11–13.

Exploration (20 minutes)

6. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 60 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Response (10 minutes)

7. Silence in Heaven . . .

A traditional spiritual practice is meditation, remaining silent for a period of time. Use this technique to help participants reflect on the silence in heaven described in the biblical text.

Invite everyone to move their chairs to an acceptable spot. Ask them to sit with back straight, feet flat on the floor, hands on knees, and palms up (as if to receive God's blessing). Invite them to be centered and grounded.

Say something like: "Concentrate on your breathing. Push everything out of your mind. Do not think about anything at all. Breathe in. (*pause*) Breathe out. (*pause*) Continue until I end with a scripture reading." Once the rhythm is established, let the group continue in silence for two or three minutes. Close with Psalm 13.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.' For if you love those who love you, what reward to you have?" O God, let us love our enemies in the week to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 7 and Revelation 7:1–17.

Unit 7: The Church Triumphant (Revelation 7:1–17)

Key Idea: The church in John’s time faced imminent persecution and danger from both military hostility and natural disaster (war, strife, famine, and death). A remnant would be preserved not *from* the disasters but *through* them.

Advance Preparation

Read Ezekiel 9:1–11. Bring bulletins, enough for each class member, from a recent worship service in your church.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

O Lord, multitudes suffer from oppression and injustice. The vision of John assures us that God knows their misery and that God will save them. By God’s grace, may we be counted in this number. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. *The Use of Numbers in Revelation*

In the text an angel says, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads.” John goes on to add, “And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand” (Rev. 7:3–4). Ask:

- What is the significance of this number? Is it a limiting number, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim, or a symbol of a vast sum?
- This interlude comes after the opening of the six seals that reveal the terrors about to come on the earth. It appears to be an answer to the question, “Who is able to stand?” (Rev. 6:17). Why should this fill us with gratitude and a certain relief?

4. *Salvation in Revelation*

Some people interpret salvation in the Bible (and particularly Revelation) as the salvation of one’s soul exclusively, the political context and imagery notwithstanding. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza says:

According to Revelation, final salvation does not pertain just to the soul and spiritual realities. Rather, it means abolishment of all dehumanization and suffering as well as the restoration of the fullness of human well-being. The vision and promise of such ultimate well-being thus are clearly intended to fortify those who face the great tribulation with all its sufferings, including war, hunger, inflation, pestilence, persecution, and death.

(Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, p. 69.)

Invite the class to list some of the dehumanizations, inhumanities, oppressions, and injustices that we may expect will be overcome when the “new heaven and the new earth” comes. Then ask: Why is it that Revelation is one of the most significant books for Christians in third world countries living under oppression and domination? What message might we hear for ourselves in this?

5. Suffering in Revelation

Note that the study book quotes Boring on p. 63 as saying, “In the midst of the Roman threat baptism comes to have a new meaning: those who bear the mark of God are kept through (not from) the coming great ordeal, whatever the beastly powers of evil may be able to do to them.” Ask:

- Do you agree with Boring’s interpretation? Why or why not?
- If we are not kept from suffering, what are we kept from?
- Give examples of what it meant to someone you know, perhaps yourself, to know that God was with you, even though things did not go the way you wanted and you suffered.

Exploration (20 minutes)

6. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 67 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Response (10 minutes)

7. The Praise of the Angels

Note that Revelation 7:11–12 contains the passage often called the “praise of the angels.” Then list the elements of praise to God on a sheet of newsprint. They are: blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might (or strength).

Pass out copies of your church bulletin. Invite the class to go through the bulletin and mark the places where each of these praise elements appears. Note any omissions.

Suggest other ways in which your church exhibits these elements of praise to God. Invite people to share how they exhibit each of these elements in their daily lives.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, “If you greet only your brother and sister, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” O God, let us be perfect in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

9. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 8 and Revelation 13:1–18. Have them also consider the question: What people, nations, or forces represent the sea and land beasts in our day?

Unit 8: A Beastly Power (Revelation 13:1–18)

Key Idea: The Roman Empire could not be defeated by force, but emperor worship could be defeated by steadfastness and loyalty to the Lamb, even to the point of martyrdom.

Advance Preparation

In a Bible dictionary, read about the Roman empire during the time of Christian persecutions. Read a commentary on Revelation for background related to the coded symbols that John used.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

O Lord, the faithful in every time and place face contenders for the praise and glory due only to you. Keep us steadfast, loyal, and faithful. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Breaking the Code

Remind the class that Revelation made sense to its first hearers. It was written for them and their time. Moreover, Revelation is written in code and we have to figure out what John was referring to in his day in order to apply it to our own. Ask:

- Why did John write in code? Why has this code language led to such diverse interpretations of Revelation? During what other times has it been necessary for people to write or speak in code to avoid persecution or death?
- In the code of Revelation, what do the two beasts refer to? What other times in history have Christians been faced with similar monsters?
- The land beast is the organization of emperor worship. We may think that we are immune to that today. Think again. What form does the land beast take in our time? What forces in our culture entice us away from the worship and honor of God and Christian values for the sake of economic gain, personal beauty, power, prestige and the like?

4. When Governments Go Wrong

The study book says on p. 71 that the sea beast is the Roman Empire and “the beast is the misuse of government, where it falls under the power of the dragon.” The dragon here is similar to the

serpent in Genesis, that is, one who seduces people into betraying the will and law of God. In John's time people may have argued against defying the Roman Empire by saying things like, "Look what they have done. They have brought peace, prosperity, protection." Even Paul boasted of his Roman citizenship and called on the protection of Rome.

Ask: What are some ways that other governments, past and present—including our own—have used propaganda to promote a misuse of power?

5. *"Let Every Person Be Subject to the Governing Authorities"*

Have the participants compare what Paul says in Romans 13 to what John says in Revelation 13.

Ask: How do you account for the differences? What had happened to make Christians so angry with government? Under what conditions is it the essence of obeying God's will to actively resist the government?

Exploration (20 minutes)

6. *Questions for Reflection*

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 78 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Response (10 minutes)

7. *A Call for Endurance and Faith*

Have the participants look at Revelation 13:10. Note that some have called this the most crucial verse in the chapter. Ask: What does it mean? Why does John counsel against taking up arms? Why is it that endurance and faith in the face of brutal oppression may be so effective in winning others to your side? Apply this principle to the Palestinians' struggle in the Middle East.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. *Closing Prayer*

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, "No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Let us, O Lord, serve you and not wealth in the week to come. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

9. *Assignment*

Have the participants read Unit 9 and Revelation 20:1–15.

Unit 9: A Thousand Years (Revelation 20:1–15)

Key Idea: The fourth, fifth, and sixth visions project a profoundly somber view of human possibilities to resist evil and have serious implications for our modern society. John's visions, then and now, are not only about the end of time but present action.

Advance Preparation

Provide paper and pens or pencils for the participants. For your own background information, look up *rapture*, *eschatology*, and *dispensational premillennialism* in a Bible or theological dictionary.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

O God, we thank you for the magisterial visions of the seer John. Don't let us get lost in the richness of his images, lest we miss his call for present action. In Jesus' name, Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 88 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. The Meaning of the Visions

Divide the class into four subgroups, assigning one of the visions to each subgroup. Ask each subgroup to spell out the details of the vision and discern its meaning, using the study book and the Bible text. Also ask each subgroup the following designated questions. After some time for subgroup discussion, have each subgroup share their findings in the entire group.

Group 1: The Binding of Satan

During this time the world would be free from deception. Why is this important? Why do we long for this? Think of examples of the kind of deception we wish could be eliminated.

Group 2: The Millennial Kingdom

What does the millennium mean to you? What effect or fear did the Y2K problem present to you? The millennial kingdom is supposed to restore human life as we were created to lead it (but lost in the expulsion from the Garden of Eden). What significance is it that this kingdom is not a return to the garden but an urban place? Draw pictures indicating what this millennial kingdom, the restoration of the world to God's intention, might look like.

Group 3: The Release of Satan and the Final Deception of the Nations

In the vision, the nations have learned nothing. Think of biblical parallels (after the flood, for instance). What does this say about humans? Think about the tribulation not as punishment but as repentance. Since the 1000 year reign of Christ does not change the human predilection for evil, what does this say about present action? That is, shall we just give up and give in or something else? What conclusions would you draw for social policy, education, maintaining a strong armed force, reducing nuclear weapons? How should this view from the future affect how we live now?

Group 4: The Final Judgment

What is the significance of the judge and the savior being one? What is the significance of the two books? How does this argue for strenuous present action?

5. Taking Revelation Literally

Point out that the study book questions on p. 81, "Over whom do the participants in the thousand-year kingdom reign (20:4), if all of the nations are dead (see 19:18, 21)?" Here the author is trying to show that we cannot take Revelation literally. The visions are not a chronology of what is going to happen, as some recent novelists have tried to maintain. There is no such logic here. Rather, we have pictures, each representing a truth. Ask: What are these truths? Why would they be such welcome words to suffering, persecuted Christians? What hope do you find in them?

Response (10 minutes)

6. Does God Allow Evil?

Note that, on p. 82, the study book quotes Boring as saying, "There is no ultimate dualism. The power of evil, deadly real though it be, is temporary and finally operates by permission of the one God." Evil operates, in other words, by permission of the one God.

Point out that in trying to understand good and evil, we must make a choice between two perspectives. One holds that good and evil struggle. Sometimes good wins, sometimes evil. This accounts for the existence of evil but leaves the ultimate outcome in doubt.

The other view, as represented in Revelation, says that there is no contest, no dualism. God is in charge. This leaves no doubt about the ultimate victory of good over evil, but it does leave a question about the origin and existence of evil. Why would a gracious, loving, and powerful God allow evil at all?

Ask: Which of these views makes the most sense to you? Are there any other ways to work this out? Which of the unanswered questions would you prefer to live with? Why did the view represented in Revelation have so much appeal to the early Christians?

Closing (5 minutes)

7. Closing Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evil doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well. Give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.’” O God, help us to turn the other cheek in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

8. Assignment

Have the participants read Unit 10 and Revelation 21:1—22:5.

Unit 10: All Things New (Revelation 21:1—22:5)

Key Idea: Revelation depicts the seriousness of the rule of satanic power, yet the good news of the letter is that God’s victory is utterly assured and complete.

Advance Preparation

Provide paper and crayons or markers for the participants. Also, prepare for your own reference a list of the key ideas from each of the ten sessions in this study.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

O God, we thank you for the time spent in studying the Book of Revelation. May the gospel of your new heaven and new earth fill us with faith, hope, and love, and encourage us to present action in the world in your name. Amen.

2. Leftovers

Check to see if there are any questions or comments left over from the previous session.

Presentation (15 minutes)

3. Questions for Reflection

Ask the group to respond to the Questions for Reflection section on p. 96 of the study book. If time is an issue, divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup work on one of the questions and then report any major findings and insights back to the entire group.

Exploration (20 minutes)

4. *Revelation: A Literary Piece, Not an Eye-witness Documentary*

Note that John Calvin likens Scripture to spectacles through which we look at the world in order to see things clearly. He says:

Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly, so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispensed dullness, clearly shows us the true God. (*Institutes*, Book I, chap. 6, part 1)

On p. 89, the study book says, “John’s vision is a carefully crafted literary piece and not an ecstatic vision. In other words, John’s vision is not an objective documentary of one who has been there.” Ask: What are the ramifications of this view for interpretation and understanding? When we look at the world through the “spectacles” of Revelation, what do we see? What was the good news (or gospel) of Revelation for its first hearers? What is it for us today?

5. *What, No Pearly Gates and Streets of Gold?*

Point out that the vision describes heaven in highly colorful and splendid terms, but this does not mean that there will be pearly gates and streets of gold. Ask:

- Why have some critics found fault with the more materialistic aspects of John’s vision?
- What does await the believer and the world at the End of all things? (See p. 89 of the study book.) Why is this, ultimately, a more satisfying if vague proposal for heaven and eternity?
- What does it mean to say that “God does not merely bring the End, God *is* the End?”

6. *The Via Negativa*

Note that on pp. 90–91 in the study book is a list of seven things that the transcendent world of This style of theology—defining something by saying what it is not—is called the *via negativa*. Ask: What are the benefits and limits of doing theology this way? What does this particular list tell us about God’s realm? What does it *not* tell us?

7. *How Many Times Does the New Jerusalem Come Down?*

Have the participants compare Revelation 21:2 with 21:10. Ask: Does the city come down twice? Point participants to p. 92 of the study book, where the writer says that this is not a prediction of an actual future event but a poetic description of what is happening now. The city, God’s new Jerusalem, is in the process of descending, coming to reality, even now.

Have the participants evaluate this idea. Ask: What does this say about our present action? What is heaven anyway? What does it look like?

Then have the participants turn to p. 95 in the study book and review the list of six characteristics of the New Jerusalem. Ask: How do these characteristics compare to any other views you may have heard of regarding heaven? What are the surprises, if any? What is appealing or unappealing?

Finally, note that on p. 91 of the study book, the writer quotes Kierkegaard as saying, “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.” Revelation is trying to make that possible by providing “spectacles” on the future so that we may understand what is happening to us now. Ask: What difference does it make to view all of life from the perspective of this future spelled out in Revelation? What changes for you? How would alternative future views change our present action?

Pass out paper and crayons or markers, and invite the participants to depict heaven in light of the foregoing discussion.

Response (10 minutes)

8. Reviewing and Recapping

Review the ground covered in this course by recalling the key ideas of the ten sessions. Invite the participants to comment on their experience and to share surprises, insights, and remaining questions. Put the sheet of newsprint labeled “Revelation” from the first session before the class. Check to see if opinions have changed. Which have remained the same?

Closing (5 minutes)

9. Prayer

Pray aloud this prayer, or use one of your own:

Our Lord said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasures is, there your heart will be also.” O God, let us store up treasures in heaven in the week to come. In Jesus’ name, Amen.