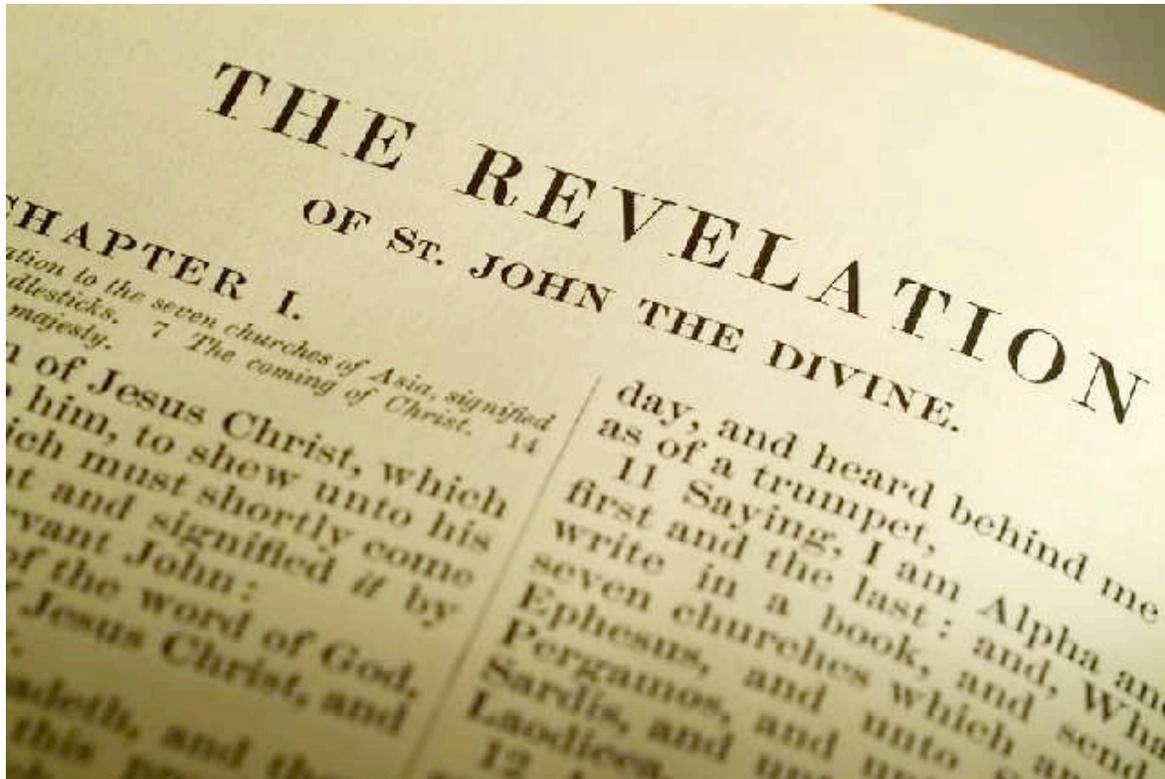


INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Studies in Revelation: Introduction and Overview
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Revelation: Introduction and Overview

The book of Revelation is one of the most difficult and, therefore, most misunderstood books in the Bible.

Filled with strange images, powerful and mysterious symbols, dire warnings, frightening tableaux, and glorious spiritual truths, Revelation has captured the imagination of nearly every generation of the followers of Jesus Christ – and not always as the Lord intends.

Our study of Revelation will take us deep into the text where we will let John's book speak to us as the message of hope and perseverance Christ intends it should be. Through our study we'll wrestle to master the skills of persevering as Kingdom citizens in an age of tribulation and turmoil, so that, like Jesus, we can come to reign – increasingly – through every kind of suffering.

We begin with an overview of the book of Revelation, with some introductory words about the message, format, composition, and purpose of John's book. We'll learn how to read Revelation properly and “wear” it joyfully, no matter what the world throws at us.

We are happy to provide *Scriptorium* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity with the Lord.

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If you find these studies, or any of our other resources, helpful, we hope you will consider making a contribution to help support our work. You can do so by using the donate button at the website or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

We hope you find this study of Revelation a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 Look Up, Look Ahead, Press On

Revelation 19.6-8

⁶ And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!" ⁷ Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." ⁸ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

The narrative of the book of Revelation hurtles toward the great climactic events of chapters 19-22: The Day of Judgment, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and the New Heaven and New Earth. These unprecedented events are not simply the *end* of the book of Revelation; they are its *focus* and *objective*, from John's first words and throughout. Christ the King has finished the work of redemption; He is ascended to the right hand of God; and He is preparing His Bride – the Church – for the glorious new Genesis which He is even now preparing.

The book of Revelation is the Lord's pledge to His Church. It is like an engagement ring, placed on the finger of the betrothed, a promise of glory and devotion and pleasure and abundant life together yet to come. Many who read the book of Revelation find it to be dark and frightening, filled with portents of persecution, setback, and the ineluctable growth of wickedness and sin.

While such a scenario is certainly part of the narrative of John's book, it's neither the whole of it nor Revelation's primary focus.

Revelation is a book of promise, a pledge of faithfulness, a down payment of theological, spiritual, and cosmic riches portending even greater boon and blessing to come. It is a gift of hope, a testament of faithfulness, and a summons to steadfastness for all who claim this engagement ring as their own. Reading revelation should direct our minds heavenward, our hopes toward unseen promises and coming places, and our feet in the path of steadfast obedience, following and proclaiming the Lord and His Kingdom.

The message of Revelation is a simple one, whatever we may be forced to endure in this life: Look up, look ahead, and press on. This will be the perspective we take on the book of Revelation, the final, enigmatic chapter in the divine revelation which is the Word of God.

Read Revelation 1-3

Read these three chapters in a single sitting. Make notes in your Bible, by underlining or writing in the margin, of insights you want to explore more fully, ideas that seem to be important to the theme of Revelation, or questions you hope to have answered during our study. If you're doing this study in a group, be prepared to share from your observations.

Glory to Glory

What can you take away from this reading to remember your encounter with the Lord and to live that encounter into your Personal Mission Field today?

Closing Prayer

Based on Psalm 2.10-12:

*Therefore, let the kings and nations of the earth be wise;
Let all judges and authorities be instructed by God:
Let them serve You, Lord, with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.*

Studies in Revelation: Introduction and Overview

*Let all men embrace Your Son and King, Jesus Christ, lest He be angry,
And they perish in the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Let all be blessed who put their trust in Him.*

Observations, notes, questions:

2 Engagement Ring

Revelation 1.17, 18

¹⁷ And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen.”

The book of Revelation is composed like a rose cut diamond with six interconnected side facets and a table facet (flat, hexagonal top facet). Think of it as an engagement ring, flat on top, sloped on six sides toward a point, set in gold, and dazzling and brilliant however you view it, whichever way you turn it in the light.

The book of Revelation tells a single story – the triumph of the Lamb and His faithfulness to His Bride – but it tells it seven different ways. We make a mistake if we try to read Revelation as a single, continuous, historical narrative, as though chapters 1-3 begin in John’s time and chapters 4-18 unfold the chronology of human history toward the end of history and the beginning of the New Heaven and New Earth in chapters 19-22.

Of course, there is a certain amount of historical narrative to the story line of Revelation. But that narrative is compact and presented in seven different forms or facets. The first facet, chapters 1-3, is like the top of the ring, that which we can most readily view. It represents the Church in John’s day, but also the Church in every day, as we shall see. It is the facet of the continuous present, the one through which we must view all the other facets of this divine engagement ring.

Facets 2-6 take up the middle chapters (6-20) and tell the story of Christ’s Bride in time from a variety of different angles. The story is told from the perspective of heaven. Thus it is enriched with mysterious creatures, cataclysmic events, and deep spiritual realities which are best understood when told over and over in a variety of ways.

The final facet comprises chapters 21 and 22, the coming future glory and Kingdom of the Lamb and His Bride. But in a very real sense, this end has already broken into the time in which we live; it is as much a facet of the here and now as it will be in the then and there. We live toward this final facet, but we live very much within it as well. Keeping this in mind, and living as though this were really so, is what gives Christ’s Bride the power to overcome as we await His return and the Marriage Supper He is preparing for us.

Each of these facets of our engagement ring is connected and shines its glory into all the others. Thus, they are never clearly separated from one another but work together, according to their peculiar “colors” and themes, to constitute the dazzling diamond of Revelation.

Read Revelation 4 and 5

Here is the second facet of the Bride’s engagement ring. It establishes the heavenly perspective from which we must read this entire book. Continue making notes and observations in your Bible. Be prepared to share from these if you are working through this study in a group.

Glory to Glory

What part of this reading helps to draw you closer to Christ and the Father? In what ways? How does this prepare you to live for Christ’s glory in your Personal Mission Field?

Closing Prayer

From Psalm 110.1-3:

Heavenly Father, You have said to my Lord Jesus,

*“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”
Lord shall send the rod of Your strength – Your Word and Spirit – out of Your Church!
Let Your Kingdom come, even in the midst of Your enemies!
Today, let me and all Your people volunteer all we are and have
To further Your power and glory;
Send me forth in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning.*

Observations, notes, questions:

3 Reading Revelation

Revelation 1.3

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near.

It's very important that we know how to read the book of Revelation. As I have said, Revelation is not a continuous historical narrative. Its focus is not on events past, or even present, but on events yet to come, events fraught with promise, hope, and glory. Revelation uses language specially chosen to capture and engage the imaginations of readers from all times, cultures, and stations in life. We must be willing to begin our reading of Revelation with John and his readers, and we must be careful, with some exceptions, not to force the images and events of Revelation into particular places and times.

In a sense, the way to read Revelation is always from above, toward the then and there, and into the here and now. I'll not say much more about that here; each week's lessons will follow this regimen in our approach to working through the texts for each day.

Second, we must read Revelation through the lens of all preceding Scripture. Revelation pulls images, quotes, prophecies, and events from the past forward, making them relevant and instructive for the present. The better we understand all such references as they were originally given in Scripture, the more light they will shed for us on the message of hope in the book of Revelation.

Third, we will encounter a good many numbers and symbols in the book of Revelation. We can say almost categorically, these are not to be taken literally. This is a common mistake many people make in reading Revelation: They want to take some numbers and images as *figures* and *types*, while picking and choosing others to be taken *literally*. Such lack of consistency in reading Revelation will certainly cause us to stumble over its main message in an attempt to grasp meanings of our own devising.

Finally, we should, following the Lord's counsel to Habakkuk, read Revelation "to run" (Hab. 2.2). Revelation is not intended to terrorize us into merely "hunkering down" against the encroaching darkness of unbelief and sin. Its purpose is to motivate us to hope, steadfastness, and witness for our coming King. Thus, in this study, we will concentrate, in each *Glory to Glory* section, on specific outcomes and steps of faith the Lord directs us to from the passages under consideration.

When it comes to gaining the most benefit from the book of Revelation, everything depends on how we read Jesus' words to John.

Read Revelation 6 and 7

Here is the third facet of the Lord's engagement ring to His Bride. Continue making observations and other notes and jotting down any questions you might have. Be prepared to share from these in your group, if you're working through this study with others.

Glory to Glory

Four horsemen ride out at the beginning of this facet. With which of these will you ride today? How will that be evident?

Closing Prayer

Taken from Psalm 45.2-5:

Lord Jesus, You are fairer than the sons of men;

Grace is poured upon Your lips;

Therefore God has blessed You forever.

Gird Your sword, the Word of God, upon Your thigh, O Mighty One,

With Your glory and Your majesty.

And in Your majesty ride out prosperously on the white horse of Your Spirit, for truth, humility, and righteousness;

And Your right hand – we, Your people – shall show You awesome things in Your power.

Let Your arrows – the Gospel – be sharp in the heart of the King's enemies,

So that many peoples fall under You today.

Observations, notes, questions:

4 The Centrality of the Church

Revelation 1.4, 5

⁴ John, to the seven churches which 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 from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.

From beginning to end, the book of Revelation is about the Bride of Christ. Jesus has come, called, saved, redeemed, and gathered to Himself a Bride out of every nation, tribe, and tongue. And though all the forces of hell and unbelief array themselves against her, He will guard, keep, and continue to prepare her for Himself, until He finally returns to bring her to their eternal home in glory.

Revelation is a book *for* the Church – to strengthen, embolden, and secure her to the Lord. It is a book *about* the Church – what she is, what she is called to do, and what she should expect in this world and the next. Revelation is Jesus letter of love and assurance to His Bride, and thus, when we read Revelation, we must always be seeking whatever the Lord wants us to learn about being more the people He has called us to be.

Yes, troubling and disturbing times will come. But we are the Bride of Christ, and nothing can change that. Yes, people will oppose and seek to defeat us. But we, the Bride of Christ, have the Lord's assurance that He is bringing us through all our trials to Himself, strengthening and perfecting us to meet Him in the air at His return in glory.

Churches grow as men and women are equipped for those works of love that build up the Body of Christ in unity and maturity (Eph. 4.11-16). So as we're studying Revelation, we must listen carefully to hear the Lord's voice leading us to greater maturity, more consistent love, and stronger patience and hope.

Let the world and the devil throw at us what they will. We are the betrothed of the Lord. We have His ring on our finger and His Word that "soon" and "shortly" we will be with Him forever. Look to Revelation for the Lord to continue His work of making us ready for the glorious wedding feast He is even now preparing.

Read Revelation 8-11

While the world in many ways is made subject to the ravages of sin, the Church continues as a faithful witness to her coming King. What can you see in these chapters to encourage you to greater faithfulness in your participation in the local church?

Glory to Glory

Today, encourage some fellow believers with the encouragement you receive as you read these chapters of Revelation. What specific actions can you take to help build-up your brothers and sisters in Christ today? What can you do to prepare yourself as a more loving Bride of your Savior and King?

Closing Prayer

From Psalm 80.14-19:

*Return, we beseech You, O God of hosts;
Look down from heaven and see,
And visit this vine
And the vineyard which Your right hand has planted,
And the branch that You made strong for Yourself.
It is burned with fire, it is cut down;
They perish at the rebuke of Your countenance.*

*Let Your hand be upon the man of Your right hand,
Upon the son of man whom You made strong for Yourself.
Then we will not turn back from You;
Revive us, and we will call upon Your name.
Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;
Cause Your face to shine,
And we shall be saved!*

Observations, notes, questions:

5 Kingdom, Tribulation, Patience

Revelation 1.9

I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The Bride of Christ exists within a tension between the righteousness, peace, and joy of the Kingdom of God and the tribulation which we can expect in the world (Jn. 16.33). The key to realizing all the promise and potential the Lord has invested in us is in learning the *patience* or *endurance* which is ours in Jesus.

This is why Jesus sent John to His Bride with the message of Revelation. It's too easy for us, finite creatures that we are, to fixate on the things we can see, the things happening around us in the world. But the Kingdom of God is not *of* this world. It's from another place. It offers a different perspective, engenders a different passion, establishes a new priority and a new pursuit, and brings a new and spiritual power to bear in bringing us into the pleasure of God and the practice of His love.

We are in this Kingdom here and now; yet there is more, much more to come. By practicing the endurance Jesus showed, as He looked through the cross to the glory and joy set down before Him (Heb. 12.1, 2), we can bear up under the tribulations of the world and know the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom, unfolding within, through, and around us.

Revelation was written to make that possible, to enable the Bride of Christ to make and live within the Kingdom turn to which He has brought us by His Word and Spirit. Revelation tells us, Kingdom citizens and ambassadors, that we must suffer in this sinful world, even as Jesus did.

But, looking to unseen things and not-yet promises, Jesus prevailed and reigns. So can we.

Read Revelation 12-15

Here we discover the essence of our struggle as well as the power of the Gospel to make the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. What can you learn about the Kingdom of God and the tribulation we can expect to endure as citizens and ambassadors of that Kingdom?

Glory to Glory

Angels stand ready to assist us in the proclamation of the Gospel (chapter 14). How will you draw on that presence and help today to point someone to the Good News of the Kingdom?

Closing Prayer

Based on Psalm 46.2-5:

*God, You are our refuge and strength,
A very present help in trouble!
Therefore we will not fear,
Even though the earth be removed,
And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;
Though its waters roar and be troubled,
Though the mountains shake with its swelling.
Come what may, Your grace flows like a river to make glad the city of God,
The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High.
You are in our midst, Lord Jesus,
In the midst of the candlesticks:
We shall not be moved!*

You will help us, with the dawning of every new day.

Observations, notes, questions:

6 Christ in Revelation

Revelation 1.12, 13

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.

Gaze deep into the luster, brilliance, radiance, sparkle, and brightness of the Lord's engagement ring, the book of Revelation. See the colors, angles, facets, and other dynamics of this carefully-cut and firmly-set ring.

What do you see?

The Light of the World. The book of Revelation is about Jesus. He gives it to John, He sends it to His churches, and stands in the midst of them, holding their pastors in His hand, to ensure right reception for His marriage proposal.

He rules with the Father in heaven, opening the divine decrees so that all might come to pass in accordance with the eternal purposes of God. He receives the worship of departed saints and angels. He rides out by His Spirit in His Church, conquering and to conquer, as He advances His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

He is the focus of the scorn and fear of the nations. He rules the powers and creatures that struggle under the burdens of unbelief and sin. He is the witness of the two olive trees. He is served by the angels. He is preparing a Marriage Supper for His Bride and a New Heaven and New Earth for her eternal abode. He is coming again, and He will vanquish all His foes, vindicate all His saints, and victoriously establish His Kingdom on earth and heaven in a fusion of spiritual and material reality that cannot be comprehended this side of glory.

He gives the book of Revelation, He superintends the progress of its narrative, and He brings its promises to those who patiently endure in seeking and advancing His Kingdom.

As you read Revelation, look for Jesus, and praise and thank Him continually.

Read Revelation 16-20

The unseen King becomes visible to all, in all His might and glory. How do these chapters help you in longing for the return of our Lord and the Marriage Supper He has prepared for us?

Glory to Glory

Jesus gave us Revelation to encourage us and to strengthen us so that we can endure amid the trials of this world. What are you learning from your reading thus far that could be used to encourage a fellow believer in the patience that is in Jesus? Find someone to encourage this way today.

Closing Prayer

Based on Psalm 126.1-3:

*Lord, when You back us out our captivity in this world of sin,
We will be like those who dream.
Then our mouths will fill with laughter,
And our tongue with singing.
Then they will say among the nations,
"The Lord has done great things for them."*

*You have, indeed, done great things for us, Lord,
And we are glad.*

Observations, notes, questions:

7 Outline

Revelation 1.19

“Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this.”

An outline of the contents of the book of Revelation could take several different forms. Jesus suggests one in this passage from chapter 1. Revelation is about things which are – the state of the Church and the world in any age – and the things which are to come – the progress of the Kingdom and the coming of the New Heaven and New Earth. And these are communicated in the things John has seen, in images and symbols and words that shroud the whole of this great book in mystery, wonder, hope, and faith.

I’ve chosen to divide our study into eight parts – the introductory material we’ve considered in this section and the following breakdown of chapters:

Revelation 1-3: The First Facet

Christ the King advances His Kingdom in, over, around, through, and by His Church.

Revelation 4, 5: The Second Facet

All the events of heaven and earth are established in the decrees of God, and Christ is His Administrator.

Revelation 6, 7: The Third Facet

The affairs of sinful men unfold alongside the progress of the Kingdom of God, but only that Kingdom is on a course for full and final victory.

Revelation 8-11: The Fourth Facet

While the world groans under the burden of sin, the Church remains faithful unto death in bearing witness to Christ and His Kingdom.

Revelation 12-15: The Fifth Facet

Satan struggles mightily to defeat Christ and His Church, but with our King and His angels on our side, the Gospel must increase and prevail.

Revelation 16-20: The Sixth Facet

Judgment is coming, and has already begun. Christ is returning soon and will defeat all His foes and unite His Bride with Him forever.

Revelation 21, 22: The Seventh Facet

The glory which is to be is the glory which has already begun. Look to the hope of a New Heaven and New Earth, and live as the City and People of God that Kingdom reality here and now.

Read Revelation 21 and 22

How do the images of coming glory excite hope and faith in you as you meditate deeply on them? Make a few notes in your Bible about this, and be prepared to share your thoughts with others.

Glory to Glory

What “here and now” steps can you take today in order to bring the “then and there” glory of the Kingdom to fuller reality in your Personal Mission Field today?

Closing Prayer

Psalm 125

¹*Those who trust in the Lord
Are like Mount Zion,
Which cannot be moved, but abides forever.*
²*As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the Lord surrounds His people
From this time forth and forever.*
³*For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest
On the land allotted to the righteous,
Lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity.*
⁴*Do good, O Lord, to those who are good,
And to those who are upright in their hearts.*
⁵*As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways,
The Lord shall lead them away
With the workers of iniquity.
Peace be upon Israel!*

Observations, notes, questions:

For reflection or discussion

1. By now you should have read the entire book of Revelation. What are some of the most important observations, insights, or questions you've recorded in your Bible or notebook?
2. In your own words, explain what T. M. means about how to read the book of Revelation. Is this a new idea for you? Have you tried reading this way during the past week? How is this different from reading Revelation simply as an unfolding historical narrative?
3. How can you see that the Church – the Bride of Christ – is central to everything that happens in Revelation. What seems to be the single most important message to the Church in Revelation?
4. How many different ways is Christ presented in Revelation? Which of these images or descriptions is most important for you? Why?
5. Explain what T. M. means about Kingdom, tribulation, and patience as summing up our experience as followers of Jesus Christ.
6. What are your personal goals for this study? What do you hope to learn? How will you know when you are gaining the benefit God intends from this study of Revelation?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.