



REVELATION

END TIMES

(5 BIBLE STUDIES)

EXAMINATION APPLICATION

BIBLE STUDIES

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THE SMALL PRINT

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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THESE STUDIES

Your Commitment

I would encourage you to make a commitment to attending your group regularly. I realise that sometimes there are things that get in the way, but do prioritise studying the Bible with other. This will involve sacrifice, and effective use of your time, but I really believe that in doing so you will get the most out of studying the Bible and praying together in your small group.

Your Contribution

What you put into the group is going to determine what you get out of the group. I encourage you to contribute honestly to the discussion and workings of the group. I understand people come from different backgrounds with unique personalities & life experiences. But, we all have a big part to play, so I encourage you to be fully present and take ownership of your group.

Your Preparation

These materials are primarily for use in preparing and/or leading group discussions, but they will also be useful in keeping your thoughts together in one place. The materials provide you with the passage so that you can identify and highlight recurring themes and note down your own thoughts and questions. Also, the materials include questions designed to provoke thought, and help you reflect on what the passage meant, both at the time it was written, and also what it means for us now.

I would encourage you to make good use of these materials, as doing so will help you contribute and get the most out of the group discussions. The materials are, however, only “tools” – they are there to help you, and not to restrict you, or force you to think in a certain manner. I want to see God speaking to you through these passages, and if the questions or notes don't help you, simply don't use them!

I have also included within these materials an introduction to the book. Make of this what you will, but I hope that it is helpful in getting you started with these studies!

Your Leadership

Here are some useful pointers in how to lead your Bible study group. Be aware that included in this study guide are more questions than you can possibly ask and/or answer in one session. They are not designed to be used rigidly, and there will rarely be a need to ask every question! Make sure that you spend some time praying at the start and ensure you read & re-read the passages as much as possible. In relation to the passages, then consider the suggested questions with an open mind. There is rarely “a single right answer” and I would encourage you to share your thoughts with your group.

I have also included a number of quotations where appropriate from relevant Christian literature, most of which are readily available online if you want to do further thinking or study. My prayer is that as you study together you would grow to love Jesus and experience Him more deeply.

I would appreciate your feedback and suggestions on how to make these materials even better!

*Steve McClure
Spring 2019*

INTRODUCING REVELATION

Revelation tends to divide opinion: some are scared of it because of its apocalyptic style and content which feels quite foreign to us. Either they avoid it completely or give up in despair because they cannot make head nor tail of it! At the other extreme there are others who are quite obsessed with it: they go to great lengths trying to use the book as the key to unlock the meaning of all that is going on in the world around us. Neither response is particularly helpful. As with many things in the Bible balance is key and the method we use for interpretation matters immensely.

'The climax of Prophecy', with these words: "The apocalypse of John is a work of immense learning, astonishingly meticulous literary artistry, remarkable creative imagination, radical political critique, and profound theology." Richard Bauckham, Scholar

There is much to be gained from studying Revelation. Indeed in 1:3 John writes *"Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near."* Let me encourage you not to give up but to come at this book carefully and thoughtfully. At this time this study series includes chapters 1-5 which concern John's vision of Jesus (c1), His letters to the seven churches (c2-3), the vision of the throne room (c4-5) and finally the vision of the new heavens and the new earth (c21-22). For completeness I would anticipate filling some of the missing chapters but when these studies were first written we were under certain time restraints for the studies. The missing chapters (c6-20) are of course the most difficult section of the book but they are also the subject of much of the debate surrounding the book of Revelation.

Revelation is full of symbolism which is used to help us understand more than to visualise what they are saying. One of the key reasons why we find it hard to understand is because we do not know our Old Testament. Revelation is a book which needs to be interpreted through the eyes of scripture:

"Of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 allude to the Old Testament (though not one direct citation is actually quoted). The book is a biblical implosion. Old Testament ideas, symbols, names and themes have been powerfully pulled together through the inspiration of the Spirit to form a collage, a kaleidoscope effect in the message John brings." R. P. Stevens, Revelation: The Triumph of God, pg 6

Where the interpretation of Revelation becomes more difficult is with regard to the past, present and the future. It is not so much a book of predictions as a description of spiritual reality. The book of Revelation centres on the person and glory of Jesus Christ. The persecuted church, to whom John was writing, really needed encouragement. This book supremely places Jesus in His rightful place both in the past, the present and the future. The book celebrates God's great victory: God and Satan, the lamb and the dragon, the church and the world, the bride and the harlot, Jerusalem and Babylon and those marked with both Christ and the devil.

John addressed the book to the seven churches in Asia and so I include here an introduction to each of them so that we can appreciate the context in which Revelation was written:

(1) Ephesus: It was the capital city of the province, a metropolitan seaport and strategic location for trade. It was a deeply pagan city and home to the temple of Artemis. The church was founded by Paul (3rd missionary journey in ~AD55) and known for its sound doctrine, evangelistic zeal and passionate devotion. The arrival of the gospel affected trade and provoked a riot (Acts 19) but continued to spread

with new churches in at least 6 other cities. However by the 6th century AD, Ephesus was deserted! The harbour was beginning to fill with silt even then and today the cities ruins are miles inland.

(2) Smyrna: A prosperous maritime city that lay 35 miles to the north of Ephesus. It was famed for its municipal magnificence. A long -time ally of Rome, the city was a centre of emperor worship and possessed a prized temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius. The church in Smyrna was undergoing persecution. In a city where acknowledging that 'Caesar is Lord' was a civic duty, a refusal to do so and to say instead that 'Jesus is Lord' was tantamount to rebellion.

(3) Pergamum: Located 15 miles inland and overshadowed by an acropolis on a 330m high hill. It had an altar dedicated to Zeus and was a centre for paganism and politics. The church had been through tough times, e.g. Antipas executed for his faith. King Balak of Moab hired the Balaam to curse Israel and though God hindered him Balaam suggested another scheme to bring about their ruin by advising the Midianite women to seduce the Israelite men into idolatry and sexual immorality (Numbers 25:1-2, 31:16). Balaam used the Nicolaitans whose false teaching encouraged believers to compromise.

(4) Thyatira: A commercial and industrial city which lay south east of Pergamum. The business-woman, Lydia, a founding convert of the Philippian church came from here (Acts 16:14). A prophetess, nicknamed Jezebel, had gained significant influence in the church and her teaching was beguiling God's people into idolatry and immorality. She held a position of influence in the church (possibly as a leader's wife) and her teaching had seduced lots of people.

(5) Sardis: A rich and glorious city. Following an earthquake in 17AD it was rebuilt by Rome but was never quite the same (although still wealthy). Although Sardis was built on a mountain, it had twice been taken because of the failings of its guards. Sardis was also the commercial centre for woollens and was known for its dyeing works. The patron of Sardis was Cybele, an Asian mother-goddess who was said to have the power to restore life to the dead.

(6) Philadelphia: A prosperous little commercial centre but was subject to earthquakes. In fact, after the earthquake of 17AD, many of its inhabitants left and settled in the surrounding countryside. For the little church in Philadelphia, the source of instability was the local synagogue, where the Jews may have taunted them that they were not truly the people of God. In addition, commercial discrimination and even outright mob violence were possibilities.

(7) Laodicea: A wealthy commercial and administrative centre who was proudly independent (e.g. refusing aid following an earthquake in 60AD. It was known throughout the Roman world for its banks; its linen and wool industry, and its medical school and widely famed medicines (esp. an eye-ointment). Laodicea's sister cities were Heirapolis and Colosse. There was no water supply (and so water had to be piped in) as it had been built for trade rather than natural resources. This made the city extremely vulnerable to attack, so its politicians specialised in appeasement. Laodicea means "rule of the people or "judgment of the people."

I trust that as you study this book you will be encouraged to persevere, that you will be inspired by the vision of Jesus Christ and motivated to pray Come Lord Jesus as we wait expectantly for His return.

Compiled by Steve McClure, Spring 2019

STUDY 1 – REVELATION 1 – IT’S ALL ABOUT JESUS...

INTRODUCTION: John records a revelation given to him by Jesus Himself that describes its purpose as showing His servants *what must soon take place* (v1). Chapter 1 includes some greetings followed by a vision of Jesus. This vision is central to all that follows in the letters to the churches in Rev 2-3.

SETTING THE SCENE: What is the most breath-taking and awe-inspiring sight that you have ever seen and why? What are your initial impressions and/or reactions to the book of Revelation? What do you know about it? Which parts are you familiar with?

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THE REVELATION (v1-3): In what sense was this *revelation* given to *the servants of Jesus* and how should we understand the kind of response demanded from its hearers? Given that we are now 2000 years later in what sense was and/or is *the time near* (v3)? How should this motivate us?

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GRACE AND PEACE (v4-6a): What is the significance of the descriptions of Jesus in v4-5 as the *faithful witness*, the *firstborn from the dead* (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 20-28), the *ruler of the kings of the earth* and the *one who was, and who is to come*? Worship God for these incredible truths.

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A KINGDOM AND PRIESTHOOD (v6b-8): How do you understand the description here of believers as a kingdom (see Rev 5:10) and priests (see Rom 12:1, Heb 10:19-22, 1 Pet 2:5-9)? How do you think that the promises that Jesus would return and all would see (v7) would have encouraged John’s readers? How do these words encourage you?

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IN THE SPIRIT (v9-11): Why are the circumstances of John receiving the revelation encouraging? In what sense was John, a *companion in the suffering and patient endurance* that was theirs in Christ (v9)? What did John mean when he described himself as *in the Spirit* on the Lord's day? Should we expect to be in the Spirit: why or why not? If yes, what might such an experience look like?

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A SON OF MAN (v12-16): What clues do we have as to the identity of the figure in the vision? What deeper truths do you think that the symbolism used here point toward or represent (see Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 & 10:4-6)? What are we to make of the numerical symbolism here that there are seven churches (v11), lampstands (v12), stars (v16) and angels (v20)?

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THE LIVING ONE (v17-20): Which images impress you most about the magnificence of Jesus? Why do you think John *fell at his feet* (v17-18)? How do you understand Jesus' explanation (v19-20) of the seven lampstands (churches) and seven stars (angels)? In what ways should the truth that Jesus is the *First and the Last* and the *Living One* (once dead but now alive) effect the way we live?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How does John's vision challenge our ideas about the person of Jesus and how can John's vision enhance our worship of Him? How is this vision rooted in the Old Testament, see v1 (Daniel 2:28), v4 (Zechariah 4, Exodus 3:14), v5 (Psalm 89:27), v6 (Exodus 19:6)?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: This vision was given to the suffering church: share together about how this vision encourages you to stand firm in the faith amidst all that you are facing. Ask God to stretch and enlarge your vision of Jesus Christ and to be ready for His return.

MEMORY VERSES: REVELATION 1:7-8

STUDY 2 – REVELATION 2 – NO COMPROMISE

INTRODUCTION: Revelation 2 includes the first four (of seven) letters to the churches in the Province of Asia. Each letter contains a message that Jesus has for that particular church and through that emphasises a particular characteristic of what the church should be like. The emphasis here is on Love (Ephesus), Suffering (Smyrna), Truth (Pergamum) and Holiness (Thyatira).

SETTING THE SCENE: Paul talks in Ephesians 4:15 about speaking the truth in love: what does that look like and what are the challenges associated in doing so? Compare and contrast these letters: what things does Jesus commend and rebuke in each church?

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JESUS AND HIS PROMISES: Each letter begins with a description of Jesus (drawn from the vision from chapter 1) and ends with a promise; what's the significance of these things to the various situations happening in each of the churches?

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LOVE: EPHESUS (v1-7): What do you think it means to have *forsaken the love you had at last* (v4) and why was it so serious that Jesus threatens to remove their lampstand? How do we get a healthy balance between truth (that which is praised) and love (that which is rebuked)? How can we ensure that everything we do is characterised by fervent love for the Lord?

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SUFFERING: SMYRNA (v8-11): What were the circumstances of the churches suffering in Smyrna? In what sense were they rich despite their poverty and affliction? How would this letter have been an encouragement to them? What should our attitude be towards suffering?

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TRUTH: PERGAMUM (v12-17): How does Satan attack this church and how is that different from Smyrna? Why does Jesus call Pergamum the place where Satan has his throne? How are we (and our own churches or communities) tempted to compromise today and what can we learn about how we should respond to such challenges?

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HOLINESS: THYATIRA (v18-29): How was this so-called prophetess like her namesake (see 1 Kings 16:31, 2 Kings 9:22, 30-37)? Why was the churches toleration of this woman such a big deal? What kind of things do we tolerate today, which Jesus would denounce?

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CLOSING CHALLENGE: Each letter closes with the same summons for those with ears to hear (v11, 17 & 29): what is the point of this challenge and to whom do you think Jesus is addressing (see also parables of Jesus such as Matthew 13:9-17)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: If Jesus was speaking to your church or community what aspects do you think He would commend or challenge? How is that church or community doing in the areas of love, truth, suffering and holiness?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share together about what God has been challenging you about from this study. Pray for one another that you would not compromise in the areas of love, truth, suffering and holiness. Pray too that each of you would stand firm.

MEMORY VERSES: REVELATION 2:4-5

STUDY 3 – REVELATION 3 – AUTHENTICITY

INTRODUCTION: Revelation 3 includes the final three (of seven) letters to the churches in the Province of Asia. Each letter contains a message that Jesus has for that particular church and through that emphasises a particular characteristic of what the church should be like. The emphasis here is on Reality (Sardis), Opportunity (Philadelphia) and Wholeheartedness (Laodicea).

SETTING THE SCENE: What does (and doesn't) it mean to be authentic or genuine in our faith? Why is this such an important question for us to consider? Compare and contrast these letters: what things does Jesus commend and rebuke in each church?

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JESUS AND HIS PROMISES: Each letter begins with a description of Jesus (once again drawn from the vision from chapter 1) and ends with a promise; what's the significance of these things to the various situations happening in each of the churches?

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REALITY: SARDIS (v1-6): What does Jesus imply about how He views the church in Sardis through what He says about it and His promise at the end? How do you think that the church in Sardis reached this place where reputation and reality were worlds apart? In what ways do we fall into the trap of hypocrisy today and how can we guard against it (see also Matthew 7:21-23)?

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OPPORTUNITY: PHILADELPHIA (v7-13): Why do you think that Jesus encourages this weak church by giving them an 'open door that no one can shut' (v8)? What do you think that open door represented and what might have held them back? What is that door for us (see also Colossians 4:3 and 1 Corinthians 16:8-9)?

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What practical steps can we take to spur one another on to 'keep His word and not deny His name' (v8) and 'hold on to what we have so that no-one will take our crown' (v11)?
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WHOLEHEARTEDNESS: LAODICEA (v14-22): What does Jesus mean by calling them *lukewarm* and why is this so serious to Jesus (see strong language in v16)? How had the church at Laodicea become so blind to its own spiritual condition? What do the garments, robes and eye salve represent?
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In the context here, how should we understand Jesus' invitation to dine with Him in v20? What does it look like to be wholehearted in our service of God?
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CLOSING CHALLENGE: Looking back over these letters what is Jesus saying about the key to being someone who *overcomes* (v5, 12 & 21) and what exactly does Jesus mean by the various rewards for those who do overcome?
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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: If Jesus was speaking to your church or community, what do you think He would commend or challenge? How is that church or community doing in the areas of reality, opportunity and wholeheartedness?
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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Pray for one another that you would live authentic, whole-hearted and outward looking lives both amongst the lost and also in the churches or communities to which we belong. Share and pray with one another about our struggles in these areas.

MEMORY VERSE: REVELATION 3:20

STUDY 4 – REVELATION 4-5 – NOW IS THE TIME TO WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION: Revelation 4-5 contains a stunning vision of the throne room of God. The vision centres on three things (a) the throne, (b) the scroll and (c) the lamb is found worthy to open the scroll and is looking like he has been slain. These chapters above all things motivate us to worship.

SETTING THE SCENE: Describe the most incredible and important place that you have ever been to: what was it that made the place so memorable? What is the big picture of what happens in these chapters and what are your initial impressions of this picture of heaven and the glory of God?

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TO HIM WHO SITS ON THE THRONE (4:1-6a): Once again John is *in the spirit* and is beckoned into the throne room of Heaven: what do you notice about what John saw and heard? Any surprises? What kind of impact does this throne-room scene have on you?

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WORTHY OF OUR WORSHIP (v6b-11): How do the four creatures (v6b-9) and the twenty-four elders respond to God’s glory (v10-11)? For what reasons do you think that God Almighty is worthy of our worship? How do you respond to a picture like this; excitement, eagerness, lethargy? What does it mean for us to worship the Father today? What crowns (v10) do we need to bring before His throne?

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How is worship depicted and how does it compare to your experience of corporate worship? Through prayer we have access into the throne room of God: how does this picture motivate you to pray?

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NO-ONE IS WORTHY (5:1-4): What do you think that the scroll represents (v1)? Why do you think that no one was found who could open the scroll and why does this cause John grief (v1-5)?

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TRIUMPHANT LAMB (5:5-7): What qualified the Lamb to be found worthy to open the scroll (v5 & 9a)? How do you respond to this picture of the slain Lamb (itself a symbol of weakness) standing at the centre of God's throne (v6)? What do the wounds of the Lamb communicate about His love for us?

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In what sense here does the vision tell us that the Lion of Judah (the root of David) triumphed (v5) and purchased men with His blood (v9)? Other references include Heb 9:11-14, 22, 10:1-18, 1 John 2:1-2

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FROM ALL NATIONS (v8-10): How is the worship experience deepened by this idea of gathering from every tribe, language, people and nation (v9)? What do you make of the bowls of incense (prayers) and the fact that God's people are described as a Kingdom and priests to serve God and to reign?

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SONGS OF PRAISE (v11-14): The numbered gathering continues to build with thousands of angels (v11): how do you respond to the song of praise they sing in honour of the lamb? How does the response of the assembled gathering compare to the substance of your own prayers (v12-14)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: R Paul Stevens writes "*Worship is not an action but a reaction, a response evoked by a vision of God's glory*": would you say worship is more lifestyle or activity? What holds you back from authentic worship? How should this vision impact the way we live on a day by day basis?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share your experiences of worshipping God both corporately and through your everyday lives (see Romans 12:1). Meditate together on the sacrifice of the Lamb and pray the prayers of 5:9-10 and 5:12-13 together as you worship the Lamb.

MEMORY VERSES: REVELATION 5:9-10

STUDY 5 – REVELATION 21-22 – THE RETURN OF THE KING

INTRODUCTION: The last two chapters of Revelation (and indeed the whole Bible) present us with a compelling vision of all that lies ahead of us. The return of the King will herald a new heaven and a new earth (21:1-8), a new Jerusalem (21:9-27) and the restoration of Eden (22:1-5). John then finishes his book with an encouragement to keep the words of this prophecy (22:6-21).

SETTING THE SCENE: What images and/or thoughts first come to mind when you think about heaven? When you think about our world what would you most like to see 'made new' and why?

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A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH (21:1-8): In what ways will the new heavens and the new earth be different from *the old order of things* (v3-4)? How do these things encourage you as you face up to the realities of life in the present?

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GOING TO HEAVEN? We tend to talk about *going* to heaven but will we? How does this idea of a new heaven and a new earth work out in practice (see also NT Wright quote)? Who will (and will not) inherit all of this? Is there anything in this description that surprises you (e.g. the lack of sea (v1) or the city described as a bride in v2)? What do we take literally and what is more symbolic?

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FULFILMENT OF SCRIPTURE: How does this section fulfil promises made throughout scripture (e.g. Leviticus 26:11-12, Ezekiel 37:27, Isaiah 25:8, 1 Cor 15:54, Isaiah 55:1-3, John 4-7-14, 7:37-39)?

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NEW JERUSALEM AND RESTORED EDEN (21:9-21): In 22:1 John was invited to come and see the bride of the lamb (v9) and is then shown the New Jerusalem: how do you understand this mixing of metaphors? What are the key characteristics of this city; its beauty, glory and security?

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LIGHT, SPLENDOUR AND ENTRY (21:22-27): What is the significance about the absence of a temple and the sun and the moon in the vision of the city (v22-24 & 22:5)? In what ways is Jesus both our temple and light? How can anyone's place in the city be assured (v25-27)?

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A RESTORED EDEN (22:1-5): The vision now jumps from city to garden: how does this part of the vision help us to understand more of what awaits us? What do these verses say about our service in the new heavens and the new earth (v3)? How do they compare to the garden scene in Genesis 2-3?

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MIXING METAPHORS: John constantly mixes his metaphors: holy city (21:9-27), the garden (22:1-5) and wedding (21:2 & 9). How do these pictures help illustrate our close fellowship with God both now and in the new heavens and the new earth? In what ways are you anticipating / preparing for your new home? Into what situations (for you or for others) might this vision give hope and purpose?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER (22:6-21): How do you understand Jesus' claim that He is coming soon (v7,12 & 20)? What do you think it means to 'keeps the words of the prophecy in this book'? Why does Jesus offer such stern warnings about changing the prophecy (v18-19)? What would be different about our lives if we were eagerly praying 'Come Lord Jesus' (v20)?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share with each other about what has encouraged you from this vision of the *new heavens and the new earth* and pray for one another that our lives would reflect a growing and eager expectation of Jesus' return for our eternal future with Him.

MEMORY VERSES: REVELATION 21:2-3

“Heaven is a picture of *present* reality, the heavenly dimension of our present life. Heaven, in the Bible, is regularly not a future destiny, but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life - God's dimension if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last, He will remake both, and join them together for ever. And when we come to the picture of the actual End in Revelation 21-22, we find, not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven, but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace.”

N.T. Wright, Surprised by Hope, pg. 26

MEMORY VERSES

STUDY 1: REVELATION 1 – IT’S ALL ABOUT JESUS

⁷‘Look, he is coming with the clouds,’ and ‘every eye will see him, even those who pierced him’; and all peoples on earth ‘will mourn because of him.’ So shall it be! Amen. ⁸‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, ‘who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.’

Revelation 1:7-8

STUDY 2: REVELATION 2 – NO COMPROMISE

⁴Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first.⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. **Revelation 2:4-5**

STUDY 3: REVELATION 3 – AUTHENTICITY

²⁰Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. **Revelation 3:20**

STUDY 4: REVELATION 4-5 – NOW IS THE TIME TO WORSHIP

⁹And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’ **Revelation 5:9-10**

STUDY 5: REVELATION 21-22 – THE RETURN OF THE KING

²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. **Revelation 21:2-3**

*“The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.” C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle**