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SESSION ONE

Revelation 1:1-20

Learner Session Guide

Focus Statement

Revelation is a difficult but rich text for contemporary Christians to interpret. Paying attention to its historical context, literary features, and theological imagination results in a contemporary, relevant, meaningful, and powerful reading of this book.

Key Verse

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. **Revelation 1:3**

Revealing Revelation

Focus Image



Armageddon ©iStockphoto.com / Igor Zhuravlov

Gather

Check-in

Take this time to connect or reconnect with the others in your group.

Pray

God of our past, our present, and our future, dwell with us as we open your word. Help us see hope in the midst of despair, expectation in the midst of disappointment, your future in the midst of our present. Grant us eyes to see and ears to hear your word afresh and anew. Amen.

Focus Activity

When someone mentions the end of days or the book of Revelation, what images and thoughts come to mind for you? Write your answer (just a word or two), large enough for others in the group to read it. When you are done, hold up your paper and read what others have written.

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Open Scripture

Read Revelation 1:1-20.

- What images or words stood out to you during the reading?
- Describe your reactions to this text.
- What questions do you have as you listen to this text?

Join the Conversation

Historical Context

1. We begin our study of Revelation by asking some basic questions. Who wrote this book and why? John identifies himself as the author (1:4). However, it is difficult to pinpoint precisely *which* John actually wrote the text. Was it the John who was one of Jesus' twelve disciples? Was it the individual who wrote the Gospel of John or the letters of John? Reaching a conclusion on these matters is difficult. At the same time, we can learn quite a bit about the relationship between John and those to whom he is writing.

- Reread Revelation 1:9-11. It is likely that John finds himself exiled on the island of Patmos by the Roman authorities on account of his faith. What else do we learn about John here?

2. The power of the Roman Empire is always in the background of Revelation. Though the center of power in Rome was geographically distant, the empire's reach was extensive, especially in the region of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), where the seven churches addressed by John were located. The island of Patmos is a small island in the Aegean Sea.

- Use the map on the next page to locate the Aegean Sea and to note how much territory was under Roman control.



3. Revelation is a subtly subversive text, trying to make sense of persecution and the oppressiveness of Roman rule by challenging the supremacy of the greatest political power the world had ever seen. One way to challenge Rome's supremacy was by writing an *apocalypse*, a kind of literature present both today and in antiquity. Apocalypses usually deal with end times, but they are even more than that. Apocalyptic is also a way of seeing the world when the world doesn't seem to make any sense. Apocalyptic literature reveals information from God, usually through an angel. This information often sounds strange because it runs contrary to the way the world is currently working. In the case of Revelation, John writes to people—who know full well the broad, almost universal, power of Rome—with a revolutionary idea: Perhaps Rome is not nearly as powerful as it seems. Perhaps Jesus is more powerful than Caesar.

- It is no accident that Jesus is described as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” in Revelation 1:5. Why would this be a revolutionary or even treasonous thing to say in the ancient world?
- Think about what this means for us today. Who or what would be “Rome” now? And are we more like the powerful Romans or the powerless Christians John is hoping to help?

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Literary Context

1. Just as the beginning of a book or movie sets the tone for the whole work, the beginning of Revelation sets the tone for the rest of the book.

- Give some examples of movies and books with particularly memorable openings. What makes these so impactful? How do they set up a certain set of expectations about the book you are about to read or the movie you are about to watch?
- Read Revelation 1:1-2 again and identify whose message is in the book and who delivers that message. Why is the source of this message so important to John?
- Now turn to Revelation 1:3. How does John expect his readers and hearers to respond? What does it mean to you that “the time is near”?

2. Revelation often uses symbols and numbers to communicate. (Some are easy to interpret. Others are perplexing.) Figuring out these symbols and numbers is part of our study of this book. Sometimes John reveals their meanings clearly. For example, in Revelation 1:20 Jesus explains that the seven stars he was holding in his right hand represent the angels of the seven churches (which we’ll discuss in session 2).

- Read Revelation 1:12-16 again. Make a list of symbols and numbers included in this passage. How can we discern what these might have meant for John and his original readers?
- Make a list of some symbols that are part of our daily lives. How do we know what these mean? Discuss how to determine who is right when a symbol means one thing to one person and something completely different to another.

Lutheran Context

1. Though his views eventually tempered, Martin Luther once wrote about Revelation, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. . . . Therefore I stick to the books which present Christ to me clearly and purely” (Preface to the Revelation of St. John, 1522, *Luther’s Works*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann [Fortress Press, 1960], 35:399). Luther was concerned initially that Revelation was too fantastical, too full of difficult symbols to be part of Scripture.

- In what ways do you think Luther’s initial views about this book are correct? Discuss your general impressions of Revelation. Is this a book you or others in your group have read in the past? How often have you heard sermons on Revelation?

2. Though some Christians do not spend a great deal of time reading and reflecting on Revelation, many others do, and we can see and hear a variety of interpretations of Revelation in the wider culture.

- List some books, films, and TV shows dealing with Revelation or the end of the world. What do you find compelling or not compelling about these interpretations? As we continue this study, consider in what ways Revelation can help us think about God, our faith, and the world around us.
- Identify some songs dealing with Revelation or the end of the world. (See hymns 433–441 in ELW for ideas.) How is the end time interpreted in the music or lyrics?

Devotional Context

1. If you were to one day find yourself “in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (1:10), what would you hope to learn about God and God’s hope for the world?

2. Perhaps you haven’t seen a vision of Jesus in full regalia or caught a glimpse into the end of the world as we know it. But have you ever experienced a moment like the one John describes in the opening verses of Revelation?

- Think about a time you were “in the spirit” or felt particularly at peace in the presence of God. How would you describe this moment in writing? What, if anything, would be difficult to put into words?

3. For John and his original readers, life under the power of Rome meant the constant threat of persecution. They looked to God’s power over Roman might for the hope that God and God’s people would prevail in the end.

- Discuss the hopes you have and what you look to for hope. How does this compare with the kind of hope John describes in Revelation?

Wrap-up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

*O God,
 you raised up Jesus Christ
 as your faithful witness and the first-born of the dead.
 By your Holy Spirit, help us to witness to him
 so that those who have not yet seen
 may come to believe in him
 who is, and was, and is to come. Amen.*
 (Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, Augsburg Fortress, 2002)



Notes



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Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Revelation 2:12-17; 3:14-22.
2. Consider collecting a journal or scrapbook of experiences, conversations, news clippings, pop cultural references, and so on that ponder, portray, or draw upon images about the end of the world. As you collect these items, ask yourself what effect such discussions and images have on your sense of hope.
3. How do you picture Jesus in your mind? Take some time this week to create a few sketches. First, sketch out Jesus as described in Revelation 1:12-16. Next, sketch out Jesus as you picture him in your daily life. Last, do an online search for portraits of Jesus. What differences and similarities do you note between the various images of Jesus? How do images of Jesus influence faith?

Enrichment

1. If you wish to read through the entire book of Revelation during this unit, read chapters 1-3 this week.
2. Hollywood movies about the end of the world or apocalypse are common. Of course, some of these movies aren't exactly works of art, but they do reflect something significant about contemporary culture. Every session of this study on Revelation will include a list of films you may want to watch (or watch again). As you view these films, ask yourself why we as a culture find these movies so compelling and watchable. What anxieties and fears, hopes and expectations do they reflect from our wider culture? This week, let's focus on two blockbuster films from 1998. That summer two different movies, *Armageddon* (Touchstone) and *Deep Impact* (Paramount), found creative ways to destroy the world and yet preserve human life. Why do you think these two very similar movies were released in the summer of 1998? What has changed between 1998 and today?

For Further Reading

The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation, by Barbara Rossing. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

Revelation: A Commentary, by Brian K. Blount, in The New Testament Library. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pp. 1-23.

Revelation and the End of All Things, by Craig R. Koester. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.