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# Introduction

## Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

Welcome to the conversation! The Bible study resources you are using are created to support the bold vision of the Book of Faith initiative that calls “the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.”

Simply put, this initiative and these resources invite you to “Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.”

We enter into this conversation based on the promise that exploring the Bible deeply with others opens us to God working in and through us. God’s Word is life changing, church changing, and world changing. Lutheran approaches to Scripture provide a fruitful foundation for connecting Bible, life, and faith.

## A Session Overview

Each session is divided into the following four key sections. The amount of time spent in each section may vary based on choices you make. The core Learner Session Guide is designed for 50 minutes. A session can be expanded to as much as 90 minutes by using the Bonus Activities that appear in the Leader Session Guide.

### • Gather (10-15 minutes)

Time to check in, make introductions, review homework assignments, share an opening prayer, and use the Focus Activity to introduce learners to the Session Focus.

### • Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

The session Scripture text is read using a variety of methods and activities. Learners are asked to respond to a few general questions. As leader, you may want to capture initial thoughts or questions on paper for later review.

### • Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Learners explore the session Scripture text through core questions and activities that cover each of the four perspectives (see diagram on p. 6). The core Learner Session Guide material may be expanded through use of the Bonus Activities provided in the Leader Session Guide. Each session ends with a brief Wrap-up and prayer.

### • Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Lists homework assignments, including next week’s session Scripture text. The leader may choose one or more items to assign for all. Each session also includes additional Enrichment options and may include For Further Reading suggestions.

## A Method to Guide the Conversation

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies has three primary goals:

- To increase biblical fluency;
- To encourage and facilitate informed small group conversation based on God’s Word; and
- To renew and empower us to carry out God’s mission for the sake of the world.

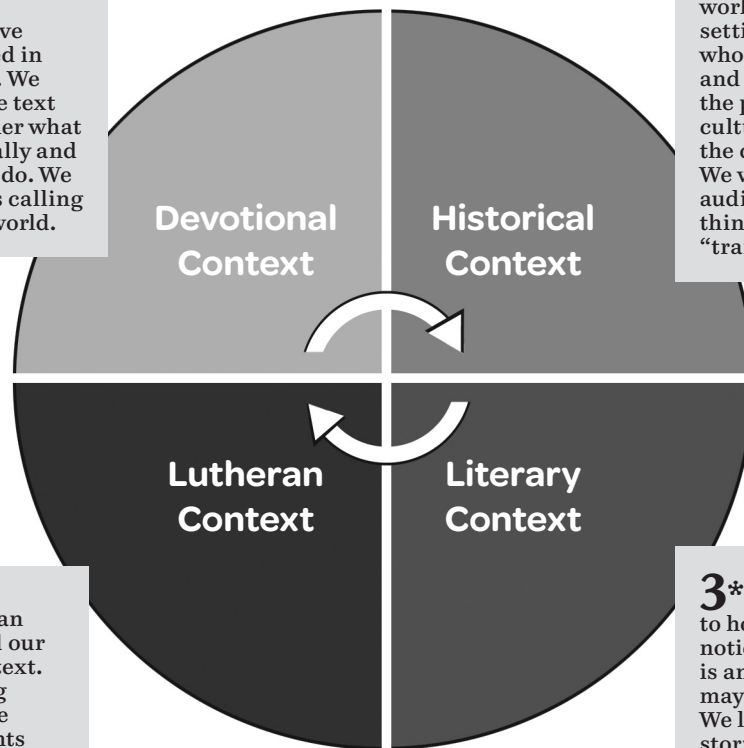
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience with the text.

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-orientated Bible conversations. The resources call for prepared leaders to facilitate learner discovery, discussion, and activity. Active learning and frequent engagement with Scripture will lead to greater biblical fluency and encourage active faith.

**1** We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

**5** We return to where we started, but now we have explored and experienced the Bible text from four different dimensions. We are ready to move into the “for” dimension. We have opened Scripture and joined in conversation for a purpose. We consider the meaning of the text for faithful living. We wonder what God is calling us (individually and as communities of faith) to do. We consider how God’s Word is calling us to do God’s work in the world.

**2\*** We seek to understand the world of the Bible and locate the setting of the text. We explore who may have written the text and why. We seek to understand the particular social and cultural contexts that influenced the content and the message. We wonder who the original audience may have been. We think about how these things “translate” to our world today.



**4** We consider the Lutheran principles that help ground our interpretation of the Bible text. We ask questions that bring those principles and unique Lutheran theological insights into conversation with the text. We discover how our Lutheran insights can ground and focus our understanding and shape our faithful response to the text.

**3\*** We pay close attention to how the text is written. We notice what kind of literature it is and how this type of literature may function or may be used. We look at the characters, the story line, and the themes. We compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life. In this interchange, we discover meaning.

**\* Sessions may begin with either Historical Context or Literary Context.**

The diagram on page 6 summarizes the general way this method is intended to work. A more detailed introduction to the method used in Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies is available in *Opening the Book of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

## The Learner Session Guide

The Learner Session Guide content is built on the four sections (see p. 5). The content included in the main “Join the Conversation” section is considered to be the core material needed to explore the session Scripture text. Each session includes a Focus Image that is used as part of an activity or question somewhere within the core session. Other visuals (maps, charts, photographs, and illustrations) may be included to help enhance the learner’s experience with the text and its key concepts.

## The Leader Session Guide

For easy reference, the Leader Session Guide contains all the content included in the Learner Session Guide and more. The elements that are unique to the Leader Session Guide are the following:

- **Before You Begin**—Helpful tips to use as you prepare to lead the session.
- **Session Overview**—Contains detailed description of key themes and content covered in each of the four contexts (Historical, Literary, Lutheran, Devotional). Core questions and activities in the Learner Session Guide are intended to emerge directly from this Session Overview.
- **Key Definitions**—Key terms or concepts that appear in the Session Overview may be illustrated or defined.
- **Facilitator’s Prayer**—To help the leader center on the session theme and leadership task.
- **Bonus Activities**—Optional activities included in each of the four sections of “Join the Conversation” used by the leader to expand the core session.
- **Tips**—A variety of helpful hints, instructions, or background content to aid leadership facilitation.
- **Looking Ahead**—Reminders to the leader about preparation for the upcoming session.

## Leader and Learner

In Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the leader’s primary task is facilitating small group conversation and activity. These conversations are built around structured learning tasks. What is a structured learning task? It is an open question or activity that engages learners with new content and the resources they need to respond. Underlying this structured dialog approach are three primary assumptions about adult learners:

- Adult learners bring with them varied experiences and the capability to do active learning tasks;
- Adult learners learn best when they are invited to be actively involved in learning; and
- Adults are more accountable and engaged when active learning tasks are used.

Simply put, the goal is fluency in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. How does one become fluent in a new language, proficient in building houses, or skilled at hitting a baseball? By practicing and doing in a hands-on way. Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies provides the kind of hands-on Bible exploration that will produce Bible-fluent learners equipped to do God’s work in the world.

## Books of Faith Series

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies includes several series and courses. This Revelation unit is part of the Books of Faith Series, which is designed to explore key themes and texts in the books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible reveals a unique story or message of faith. Many core themes and story lines and characters are shared by several books, but each book in its own right is a book of faith. Exploring these books of faith in depth opens us to the variety and richness of God’s written word for us.

## Revelation Unit Overview

Many people avoid reading Revelation due to fear or confusion. Some of the imagery is violent and fearsome, as even the very foundations of the world are shaken. Making matters more difficult are the various ways the book is read and interpreted in our culture. Is Revelation a precise road map of the last days? Is it a book that can only be interpreted by certain people with special knowledge? Is it better to just leave it alone?

One thing that should shape how we understand Revelation is the long, ever-present shadow of Roman power. Rome's economic, political, and military might was simply part of daily life for John, the writer of Revelation, and the seven churches he addresses. John argues, however, that the power of Rome is illusory and temporary. True power and justice reside only with God, and God's followers will not be left to suffer without comfort and hope.

The genres of writing also shape our understanding of the book. Revelation begins like an ancient letter, or, actually, seven letters to seven churches. Then John begins to describe a revelatory experience, a profound moment of understanding granted by God through Jesus Christ. We will read both the letters and the visions, and think about how they inform each other.

Certainly our understanding of Revelation is also shaped by its heavily symbolic language. Fortunately, Revelation itself interprets some symbols for us, while other symbols trace back to traditions in the Hebrew Bible. It is important, however, not to dwell so much on the most enigmatic portions of the book that we miss the forest for the trees. This study looks at important symbols and keeps the big picture of Revelation in mind.

The central vision of the book is found in Revelation 4-5, where God is on a throne and Jesus is the Lamb who was slain. This vision should also be central to our understanding of the book. Despite all evidence to the contrary, God rules and rules alone. Jesus is made powerful through weakness. God's character and Jesus' faithfulness persevere.

Ultimately, Revelation is not about providing a road map or predictions for the end of days. Instead, it describes a way for us to relate to God and to one another today. It invites us to trust in God and God's work, to look to Jesus' return with hope for a new world, and to read, study, and listen for God speaking to us through these words today.

Session 1, "Revealing Revelation" (Revelation 1:1-20), introduces the book, writer, genre of literature, and role of the Roman Empire.

Session 2, "Life and Faith in Pergamum and Laodicea" (Revelation 2:12-17; 3:14-22), looks at two of the seven letters to churches, showing some of the challenges faced by the earliest Christians.

Session 3, "Visions of God and the Lamb" (Revelation 4:1-6a; 5:1-10), explores the central image in the book. While the God of Revelation is exalted in the highest heavens, this same God is also profoundly concerned with the plight of God's children.

Session 4, "Destruction and Protection" (Revelation 6:15-7:17), shows the two paths taken by this book. While ordeals, tribulations, and plagues characterize both the present and the future, God's promises are ever faithful.

Session 5, "The Great 'Battle'" (Revelation 12:1-17), demonstrates that the result of the great conflicts between God and the forces of evil is clear: God, God's creation, and God's children are victorious.

Session 6, "The Fall of a Great and Powerful Empire" (Revelation 18:1-24), studies the fall of Babylon, a code name for Rome. In the shadow of the Roman Empire, Revelation undermines the power and permanence of the preeminent political force of the ancient world.

Session 7, "Our New Home Is Here but Not Here" (Revelation 21:1-8), deals with the renewed creation that brings to full fruition God's original hopes for the world.

Session 8, "Jesus Is Coming Soon" (Revelation 22:8-21), looks to the future with hope, anticipation, and expectation.

## Revelation 1:1-20



### 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

### Focus Image



Armageddon ©iStockphoto.com / Igor Zhuravlov

# Revealing Revelation

## Session Preparation

### Before You Begin . . .

Revelation is a difficult book to read. With powerful and often disturbing images, John leads us into a world of comfort and hope in the midst of persecution. But there is also fear and trepidation as the very foundations of the world are shaken. Making matters even more difficult are the various ways Christians have read this book. Is Revelation a precise sketch of the last days? Is it a word of relief to early Christians that has no relevance to us? Is it something in-between? Something else entirely? In the end, *how* we read is as important as *what* we read in this book.

### Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

### Session Overview

Too often, Christians are tempted to avoid reading Revelation. Its powerful images are not easily interpreted. And yet Revelation is a powerful work of theology still relevant for us today. To begin our exploration, we will focus on the historical and literary background of this book and on how Christians have interpreted this book. Basically, we are asking, "What kind of book is this?" and "How do we read it?"

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first word in the Greek text of Revelation tells us a great deal about what kind of book this is. The NRSV translates the word as "revelation." The Greek term behind this translation tells us that the **literary genre** of Revelation is **apocalyptic**. It is a revelation of knowledge so powerful and mysterious that humans can only know it if God and God's intermediaries reveal it to us. Revelation 1:3 is therefore not a claim based in John's confidence in his writing as much as a confession that the contents of Revelation are direct from God.

## SESSION ONE

### ? Literary genre:

Literary genres refer to different kinds of writing. For example, we can read something and usually identify pretty quickly whether we are reading a fairy tale, a newspaper article, or an academic paper. Literary genres provide helpful cultural cues for us. Different genres follow certain rules in their composition. What kind of language is used? What images are common? Genre also points to how a piece of literature communicates or in what sense it speaks truth. Think for example of the different insights that a fairy tale and a newspaper article communicate.

### ? Apocalyptic:

Apocalyptic is a genre of ancient literature but also a worldview. As a genre, apocalyptic usually contains divine communications that were unknowable prior to the “unveiling.” (The Greek term behind “apocalypse” literally means “unveiling.”) How do humans get to know this knowledge? In apocalyptic, some intermediary—like an angel—serves as a bridge between God and humans. As a worldview, apocalyptic expects God’s powerful intervention in history in order to upend the status quo of injustice and unfairness.

### ? Eschatology:

Eschatology and apocalyptic are often closely aligned. While apocalyptic is primarily a genre and a worldview that often deal with end times, eschatology is an area of theological reflection dealing with the culmination of life as we know it. Eschatology can deal with the end of individual lives but often deals with the culmination of the world as it now is. Simply and in most cases, eschatology is reflection on the end of time as we know it.

Revelation deals with **eschatology**, that is, with a view toward the end or culmination of the world as we know it. Why would John and his first readers be concerned about the end of time? They were concerned not because they were oriented toward the future, but toward a present marked by oppression and trouble. Eschatology, then, is comfort in the midst of tribulation for a powerless people. Revelation argues that the power of Rome is illusory and temporary. True power and justice reside only with God, and God’s followers will not be left to suffer without comfort and hope.

The challenge for us today is to imagine ourselves in such a situation. In general, we as Westerners are generally well-off, powerful, and in control of our lives. For the most part, the status quo works *for* us, not *against* us. This was not the case for the early Christians. Looking ahead to God’s upending the world brought greater comfort and hope to them than it probably does to most of us. Help participants reflect on the difference between the ancient world and today. Help them also reflect on how Revelation still speaks to us today.

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Revelation exhibits at least two different genres of writing. The book begins like an ancient letter, much like Paul’s letters to communities of early believers, but something is rather different here. Quickly, John turns to a description of a revelatory experience, a profound moment of understanding granted by God through Jesus Christ. What we have in the book of Revelation is an apocalypse with an opening that reads like a letter. Generally, Christians tend to focus either on the seven letters to the churches or on the visionary details of the remaining chapters. But Revelation’s opening verses suggest that we need to read these two parts of Revelation *together*. How do the letters inform the visions and vice versa? Highlight this important question for participants in this session. We will return to it as the study moves along.

The first few verses of Revelation help set our expectations as readers. This is a book with an indispensable, God-breathed message. Its veracity is rooted not in John’s authority but in God’s direct revelation. What are the implications of such a claim?

The message of Revelation is so profound, so surprising, so unexpected that John frequently opts for heavily symbolic language. We see an excellent example of Revelation’s symbolic language in 1:12-16. What does it mean to portray Jesus with

seven stars in his hands? What does it mean to portray Jesus with a sword protruding from his mouth?

Fortunately, we have help in interpreting these symbols. First, Revelation itself will interpret some symbols for us. So, according to Revelation 1:20, the seven stars and lampstands are the seven churches and their respective angels. Second, Revelation's symbols are usually not unique to John. He relies on traditions in the Hebrew Bible to craft his symbols. The notes of a good study Bible will point you in the right direction.

Finally, however, it is important not to dwell excessively on the most enigmatic portions of Revelation. Help participants keep their vision wide. What is the big picture? What are the larger theological questions being posed by Revelation? In the study of Revelation, it is best not to miss the forest for the trees.

#### LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Martin Luther did not hold back in his comments about Revelation. In his 1522 preface to his translation of the book, he expresses doubts over Revelation's place in the canon of Scripture, though he acknowledges his concerns may be largely personal and perhaps not binding on others.

Initially, Luther is concerned that Revelation's consistent use of mysterious images, symbols, and visions does not fit in with the otherwise clear witness of the rest of the Bible. Others, Luther argues, use "clear and plain words" and "I can in no way detect the Holy Spirit produced it." Second, he chides John for valuing his work too highly (see 22:18-19), especially when his writing is so unclear. Furthermore, he notes that a number of the earliest leaders of the church "rejected this book a long time ago." Last, he returns to his personal convictions: "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], pp. 35:399).

Anyone who has spent time with Revelation is likely to relate to Luther's critique. The writer often trades on opaque images. Many have abused these complexities with wild interpretations that seek to draw a one-to-one correlation between the biblical text and specific contemporary events.

Eventually, however, Luther's views on Revelation shifted. Craig Koester observes that "Revelation warns readers not to



## SESSION ONE

be deceived into despair. . . . As a promise, Revelation assures readers that if ‘the word of the gospel remains pure among us, and we love and cherish it, we shall not doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst.’ For ‘through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels, Christ is nonetheless with his saints and wins the final victory’” (*Revelation and the End of All Things* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001], p. 12).

### DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Why does John appeal to images, symbols, and vision instead of plain language? To be sure, apocalyptic literature tends to draw on such imagery, much like our modern fairy tales appeal to witches and trolls, and histories draw on dates and statistics. But something else might be happening.

John speaks in powerful but enigmatic visions because the message he has received from God through Jesus is itself powerful but enigmatic. Hope in the midst of persecution is difficult to comprehend. Expectation and trust in God’s promises are difficult to maintain when the rest of the world seems entirely opposed to you.

Think about a time when you experienced a difficult trial in life. How could you best describe that moment to another person? Would you rather describe it like a journalist or a poet?

### Facilitator’s Prayer

*God of all creation, for your wondrous world, I give you thanks. God of consolation, for the many ways you have brought your grace into my life, I give you thanks. God of all time and space, for walking with me in the past, present, and future, I give you thanks. Open now my mind to read your word and to follow your Spirit where you may lead me. Amen.*



#### Tip:

How well do the participants in this study know each other? Consider ways to introduce or reintroduce the participants to one another. Provide space for participants to share both their names and their stories as they introduce themselves. Even if participants know each other by name, they may not know each other’s stories of faith.

### Gather (10–15 minutes)

#### Check-in

Take time to greet each person and invite learners to introduce themselves to one another.

#### 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.

## Open Scripture (10–15 minutes)

Ask one or several members of the group to read the text. As they read, ask two or three other people to draw what they hear on a whiteboard or several large pieces of chart paper. At the end of the reading, allow time for the artists to explain their work.

OR

Ask one person to read the text while other group members keep a tally of every time a word or a phrase comes up that they don't understand or want to know more about. At the end of the reading, ask a few people to share some of the questions they now have after hearing the text.

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 (25–55 minutes)

### 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.



### Tip:

Consider using videos from [enterthebible.org](http://enterthebible.org), a Luther Seminary Web site, as introductions to these sessions. This site includes several short but significant reflections on Revelation and other Scripture texts.



### Tip:

Make sure you let participants know they will be sharing their reflections with the rest of the group. While honesty and openness about our encounters with Revelation are the aim, we also want to assure that no one's doubts or questions are aired without their permission.



### Tip:

Reading Scripture together is both incredibly rewarding and difficult for many of us, and this is particularly true when we engage with Revelation. As you check in and introduce this study, make it clear that all participants are learners in the process. We all have important, profound questions to bring to the table. Find ways to encourage everyone to participate in discussion. Set the tone as the study leader by sharing the questions, doubts, and excitement you bring to this text.



### Tip:

A term like “apocalyptic” or “eschatology” is not part of everyday language for most people. These terms are good shorthand for the study but can also confuse participants who may be hearing or discussing this terminology for the first time. Take the time to make sure everyone has a good grasp of these terms before moving forward. Think of contemporary examples to help illustrate these complicated notions.

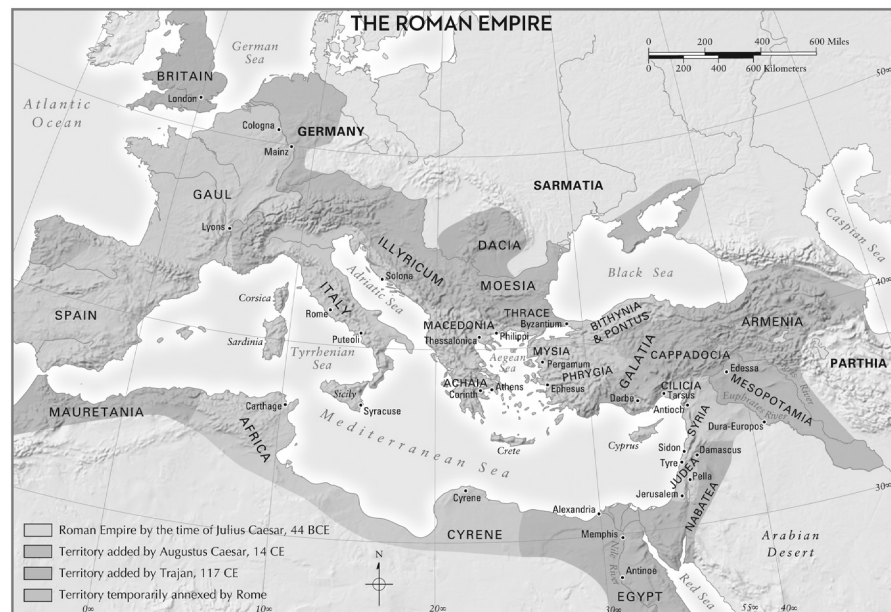
## SESSION ONE

- 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 below 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?

### 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.

### + Bonus Activity:

Revelation is not the only portion of Scripture that trades on apocalyptic language. Read Matthew 24, Mark 13, or Luke 21 and note what Jesus says about “the end.” Discuss what it means for our faith that Jesus himself highlighted apocalyptic themes in his ministry.

### + Bonus Activity:

Turn to Daniel 7, another passage of Scripture that draws upon apocalyptic images and symbols. What similarities can you draw between Daniel 7 and Revelation? Again, we discover here that Revelation is not an innovation in Scripture but part of a larger theological tradition.

### Tip:

Another example of the powerful way stories begin is the fairy-tale favorite “Once upon a time.” Think for a moment about how much information those four words carry. Those four short words tell you that the genre of the story you are about to hear is a fairy tale. The story will probably involve some elements of fantasy. Finally, the story will end with some moral. From four little words we gather all this information and establish our expectations. We know that we are not reading a newspaper article or a novel but a fairy tale, and we can calibrate our expectations accordingly.

### + Bonus Activity:

Ask participants to brainstorm different symbols that populate our world. Challenge them to list as many as possible in two minutes. Make sure to include less obvious symbols like letters, words, and street signs. Reflect on how we learn to “read” these signs and symbols. Ask individuals to share moments when they have been confused by a new symbol or by an old symbol in a new context.

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### Bonus Activity:

If one or more group members have traveled internationally, invite them to share some of their experiences getting adjusted to new symbols in a different place. How did they learn what these signs and symbols meant? How did it feel to be in a place where signs and symbols were not always clear to them?



### Tip:

Martin Luther was certainly not the first Christian to have questions about the place of Revelation within Scripture. While the Gospels and many of Paul's letters were accepted as scriptural rather early on, texts like Revelation and Hebrews, for example, had a more difficult time gaining universal acceptance.



### Bonus Activity:

The foreword to Revelation by Martin Luther can be found online at [www.bible-researcher.com/antilegomena.html](http://www.bible-researcher.com/antilegomena.html). Print it out to share with the group, and reflect on ways participants do or do not share Luther's concerns about Revelation.



### Tip:

Encourage participants to think about Revelation not as a puzzle to be solved but as a theological reflection of hope in the midst of hopelessness. The aim of reading Revelation as the word of God is not to identify correctly who or what each character or symbol is supposed to represent, but what the book might teach us about God and lives lived in obedience to God.



### Bonus Activity:

Ask participants to re-create in writing or in art an experience where they felt the presence of God in a particularly powerful way. As some share their efforts, ask all the participants to reflect on what emotions, experiences, or insights were most difficult to communicate.

### 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

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.
2. Encourage participants to engage the daily readings. Explain that the sessions can only cover a portion of Revelation and that the daily readings help provide a wider context for discussion. Encourage participants to use a journal, computer, or smartphone to keep notes about questions and insights they gather as they read and reflect on the study.
3. Ask participants to share what big questions they hope to answer during this eight-session study. What are their goals and hopes for the study? Consider collecting these big questions and returning to them at the end of the eight sessions.

### 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)

## Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

### 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.



#### Tip:

Remind everyone that when reading a complex book like Revelation, many questions are bound to arise.



#### Tip:

Your group may want to keep the conversation going throughout the week. Consider creating an e-mail list, Facebook page, or private blog for the group.

## SESSION ONE



### Tip:

Each session will include one or two suggested films along with some discussion questions. Consider hosting a movie night at some point during the eight-session study to foster more conversation.



### Tip:

Sensitivities can vary from person to person. Encourage everyone to do some research on the content and theme of suggested movies prior to watching them. Also, feel free to brainstorm a list of alternative movies you might watch.

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.

### Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Revelation 2:12-17; 3:14-22.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.
5. Be on the lookout for current events (whether in politics or pop culture) that might inform the group's reading of Revelation.