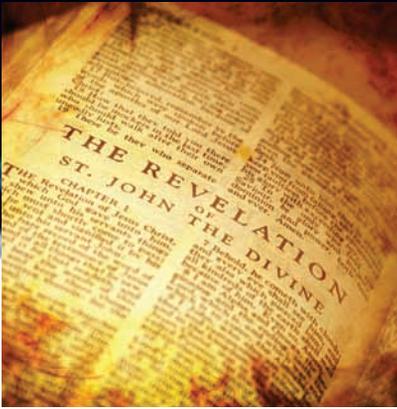


REVELATION

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# THE VISION STATEMENT



9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES

REVELATION

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9 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
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GREG CLARKE



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*The Vision Statement*

Second edition

© Matthias Media 2010

First published 2003

Matthias Media

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ISBN 978 1 921441 62 2

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Cover design and typesetting by Matthias Media.

Series concept design by Lankshear Design Pty Ltd.

# »» CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	4
How to make the most of these studies .....	5
STUDY 1: Behold the King <i>[Revelation 1]</i> .....	9
STUDY 2: The Son of Man's letter <i>[Revelation 2:1-3:22]</i> .....	17
STUDY 3: The other reality <i>[Revelation 4-5]</i> .....	23
STUDY 4: Opening the scroll <i>[Revelation 6:1-11:19]</i> .....	31
STUDY 5: Powers and authorities <i>[Revelation 12-14]</i> .....	41
STUDY 6: The end of judgement <i>[Revelation 15-16]</i> .....	51
STUDY 7: The company we keep <i>[Revelation 17:1-19:10]</i> .....	59
STUDY 8: A feast and a fire <i>[Revelation 19:11-20:15]</i> .....	67
STUDY 9: Facing God <i>[Revelation 21-22]</i> .....	75
APPENDIX: Tips for leaders .....	85

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These studies have been developed by Greg Clarke, some of them from sermons given by Philip Jensen in Kuantan, Malaysia in 1997. Our thanks to Adam Road Presbyterian Centre and Prinsep Street Presbyterian Church for supplying additional study material that accompanied Philip's sermons and has been incorporated in some of these studies.

## » HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

### 1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God's word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of 'interaction'—interaction with the Bible, with the things we've written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

## 2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what these passages mean for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

## 3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

## 4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. If you are a group leader, the material in the appendix ‘Tips for leaders’ will help you think through how to use these studies in a group setting.
- If your group members usually don’t work through the study in advance, it’s extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the ‘Implications’ to focus on.
- We haven’t included an ‘answer guide’ to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

## 5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.



## » STUDY 1

# BEHOLD THE KING

[REVELATION 1]

1. What excites you about studying the book of Revelation? What worries you?

IT IS TEMPTING TO SAY AT THE outset of these studies on Revelation that it is a difficult book to understand—one that has baffled and divided Christians down through the ages.

But this isn't strictly true. It is true that Revelation seems unfamiliar to 21st-century readers. It contains highly symbolic language, strange fantasy-like imagery and cosmic spiritual events. It seems disconnected from history in a way that the rest of New Testament is not. However, if you know the gospel of Jesus Christ, and if you have read at least some of the Old Testament, Revelation need not seem so strange at all.

In fact, the book of Revelation contains more references to the Old Testament than any other New Testament book. It presents for us—often in dramatic, pictorial style—the same truths that the Gospels teach about Jesus and his relation to the world.

As we work through the book in these nine studies, we will be relying on the Bible itself to interpret Revelation's message. Many discussions of Revelation get caught up in particular details of history: in dates and Roman emperors and who the Antichrist might be. But these are often distractions from the actual teaching of the book,



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## What kind of book is this?

WHEN YOU START TO READ A BOOK, it helps to have some idea of what kind of book it is. Is it a novel, an economics textbook, a street directory, or a diary? It is usually quite easy to see which category (or genre) a book fits into, and this helps us to understand what is written. It stops us making foolish errors, such as thinking that characters in a novel are actually historical figures or that we will get some relaxing holiday escapism from reading the street directory.

What kind of book is Revelation?

It might be a hard question to answer, were it not for the fact that John has given us plenty of cues as to its genre. It is first a *revelation*—that is, an ‘unveiling’ of something that was hidden. Revelation reveals a mystery to us—the mystery of what is happening in the heavenly realms. It gives us a window into heaven and the reality of God. Note, too, that it is ‘the revelation’, not ‘revelations’, as it is often mistakenly called.

The Greek word we translate as ‘revelation’ is **‘apocalypse’**. ‘Apocalypse’ has come to have a wider meaning in contemporary culture, suggesting a great catastrophe or the end of the world, but in the Bible it simply means to reveal something that was hidden. This revelation has come ‘down the line’ from God to Jesus, from Jesus to his angel, from the angel to John, and from John to his readers (1:1-3).

Second, this book is a *prophecy*. John says so at the beginning (1:3) and end (22:7, 10, 18) of the book. The book records for us John’s visions while on the island of Patmos, sent as a letter to “the seven churches”, since he was not present himself to deliver God’s word. As with all of God’s prophets, John is revealing both the things “that are” (1:19) and “those that are to take place after this” (1:1, 19).

The third cue as to the nature of this book is found in Revelation 1:4. It is a *letter*, written “to the seven churches that are in Asia”. From 1:4 to the end of the book is one long letter to these churches, sent as a

## What is apocalyptic literature?

‘Revelation’ or ‘apocalypse’ refers to a kind of writing that was prominent during the period 300 BC to 200 AD (the book of Revelation was probably written towards the end of the first century AD). An apocalypse usually tells the story of a person’s vision of another world, often a world of the future, where the secrets of reality are revealed and salvation is secured. It frequently contains images of the end of the world, heaven and hell, celestial beings and battles between them.

In the Old Testament, Daniel 7-12 and Zechariah 9-14 are apocalypses. ▶

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Some examples of apocalypses outside the Bible include parts of 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and The Shepherd of Hermas. Our understanding of apocalyptic literature has been much improved by studying the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain many apocalypses.

The style of this literature causes some difficulties for today's readers. But this need not be the case—it just requires us to remember what sort of writing we are dealing with. Apocalyptic writing is often dense with symbolism and highly stylized; it often refers to mythological figures and heroes from past ages; it will often be concerned with violence, vengeance, oppression and injustice. Its impact on us may be less logical than impressionistic, like a movie or abstract painting rather than an essay.

When we know this, it becomes easier to appreciate the overall message of apocalyptic writing without getting bogged down in the sometimes frustrating details.<sup>1</sup>

blessing to those who are waiting for the return of Christ. This helps us to place the letter in its historical context, and to be careful about the way in which we apply it to our own situation. It is certainly written for us, as is all Scripture, but we are not its original readers and we have to remain mindful of this.

Perhaps the best summary description of the nature of this book is “a letter of prophecy written in apocalyptic style”.

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### Read Revelation 1:9–20.

6. What was John told to do by the trumpet-like voice?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
7. John's vision in verses 12–16 draws into play several Old Testament passages. Quickly read these passages to get a feel for the connections:
  - Ezekiel 8:1–2
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - Daniel 7:13–14
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - Daniel 8:15–17
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - Daniel 10:4–6

- 
- Zechariah 4:1-4

8. What can we make of the fact that the man appears “in the midst of the lampstands”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
9. The symbolism of the stars and lampstands is explained by the man (one of the few places in Revelation where this is the case). From this explanation (v. 20), what can we conclude about the meaning of the vision?

---

## The godlike man

AS WE HAVE SEEN, IN MANY PLACES in the Old Testament, a godlike man appears who reveals ‘reality’ to the prophet. The man in Revelation 1:13ff fits this picture, and he reveals to John that he is the key-holder to life itself. It seems only appropriate that John fell down as if dead.

However, there is a great sense of comfort and security in this vision, and in this whole initial section of John’s letter to the churches. The one who holds the key to life, who has himself conquered death (1:18), is standing with the churches and holds their angels in his hand. How wonderful to

have such a one on your side! As John said earlier, Jesus (for who else could the figure possibly represent?) *loves* his people, and has made them into a kingdom of servants who receive “grace” and “peace” (1:4) because they are loved by their Lord. Although the vision frightens John, it is also his great comfort, as he suffers on the island of Patmos, to know that the living one does not wish him to be afraid. It is as CS Lewis described the Christlike Aslan in his Narnia books: “Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”<sup>2</sup>

---

## A book to read aloud

Revelation 1:3 tells us that this letter was intended to be read out loud. This can be a very valuable exercise for a small group to do, too, as it helps you to see (rather, to hear) how the book holds together and where the emphases lie.

You might like to try this before beginning the next study.

If you are in a small group, get one or two people to read the book aloud (it is a good idea to choose competent readers and not too many of them) while the others listen. Note down the way the structure of the book comes across, the significant themes, the striking images, and anything else that springs to mind.

To read the whole book in one sitting takes around one hour.

## » Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- It has already become clear that Revelation does not quote the Old Testament word for word, but tends to pull together different Old Testament images and concepts. Why do you think this might be the case? What does it tell us about the centrality of Jesus to the whole of Scripture?
  
- Is Revelation about the past, the present or the future? Discuss.

- 
- How would you respond if someone said to you, "Revelation doesn't belong in the Bible because it doesn't teach the gospel"?

### » Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for sending his angel to John so that this "testimony of Jesus Christ" was recorded for us to read today.
- Thank God for freeing us from our sins by the blood of Jesus.
- Ask God for wisdom over the coming weeks as you study the book of Revelation.

### Endnotes

1. Further information can be found in good Bible dictionaries. For a sample of apocalyptic literature, see Mitchell Reddish (ed.), *Apocalyptic Literature: A reader*, Hendrickson, Peabody, Mass., 1995.
2. CS Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, HarperCollins, New York, 2005, p. 81.

## » TIPS FOR LEADERS

SOME FEEL DAUNTED WHEN THEY approach the book of Revelation. It is written in a style that is unusual for many of today's readers. The symbolic language, the spectacular drama and the cosmic perspective of the book can make the reader feel as if it is all too difficult to understand. Furthermore, Christians are often divided about how to understand Revelation, and this can leave individual readers wondering if they will ever work it out for themselves. Some of the most bizarre religious teachings have found their source in this biblical book, and many readers feel frightened of it as a result.

All of these factors need to be addressed by any leader of a Bible study on this book. First, the leader ought to address any of these thoughts or feelings in his or her own approach; he or she will then be able to serve others in the same way.

The first study helps with understanding the *style* of the book: it looks at what apocalyptic literature is, how

Revelation is both similar to and different from other apocalyptic literature, and how to read it without getting totally bogged down in the details.

These studies approach the book by concentrating on *the text of the Bible itself* before drawing any conclusions about how to relate it to church history, theological views and the rest of the Bible. This means that issues such as dispensationalism, the millennium, the number of the beast and the identity of the antichrist are in the background rather than being the focus of discussion.

As to the many views that people may hold regarding this book, it would be worthwhile getting people to raise these early on, acknowledging that we need to bring our understanding in line with what we can know from the Bible, and we need to be patient with each other as we sort out the myths from the reality.

People's thinking on judgement, heaven, hell, and the future of the

---

world has sometimes derived from films or novels which distort or ignore Scripture. Try to bring up this fact early in the group's discussion, and create a willingness within the group to re-examine your beliefs in light of God's word.

## How to use these studies

These studies have been written to cover the whole of Revelation in nine sessions. This means some rather fast reading through sections of strange symbolism. We believe this is the best way to understand the meaning of the book—since it was most likely read aloud to the early Christian churches (Rev 1:3)—so that the flow of the story, rather than the details, comes across. Having said that, you may need more than the usual one session for study 4 and/or study 5.

There are lots of Old Testament references in these studies. This is deliberate, because we want to get across the important truth that in order to understand the revelation, we need to know the rest of God's word. The Old Testament prophetic books are particularly important. However, we recognize that there will be a good deal of 'Bible-flipping' taking place in most studies. It may be wise to minimize this, in order to save time and not intimidate people with less Bible knowledge. You may need to ask the more experienced Bible readers in the group to find the passages and do most of the reading.

Finally, the focus of these studies is

Jesus Christ—the one who gives the revelation to John, and the one on whom the revelation is centred. If you find a study drifting into strange, unprofitable territory, think about how it can be brought back to focus on the one who is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega.

## Resources for understanding Revelation

There are an enormous number of commentaries and books on Revelation, many of which have a particular 'spin' on the text. Of those that take an approach similar to these studies, Michael Wilcock's *I Saw Heaven Opened* (IVP, Bible Speaks Today series) and William Hendricksen's *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Baker) are recommended.

Two gigantic scholarly commentaries on the Greek text have recently been published, one by David Aune and one by GK Beale. At the intermediate level, Robert Mounce's *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans, NICNT series) is worth a look. Graeme Goldsworthy's study, *The Gospel in Revelation*, is also very valuable: it is now only available in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy* (Paternoster).

On the subject of apocalyptic literature, see the sidebar in study 1 (pp. 11-12).

Matthias Media stocks MP3 CDs of sermons by Phillip Jensen on each chapter of Revelation. For more details, visit our website: [www.matthiasmedia.com.au](http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au)



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# THE VISION STATEMENT



It's a book of the Bible that either fascinates or repels the reader—sometimes doing both at once.

Throughout Christian history, believers have struggled with the book of Revelation: with its symbolism, its dire judgements, its promises of eternal glory and its relationship with world events.

The reader of Revelation enjoys the same startling privilege as the writer: an insight into the very inner rooms of heaven itself, to see what is going on there now, and what is soon to take place.

These nine studies tread a path through the minefield of interpretations, avoiding speculation and making sure to stick to what the Bible is in fact saying. In this way, a clear 'vision statement' emerges from Revelation: the risen Jesus is Lord of all.

Suitable for groups or individuals.

