

Study Guide
“I Tell You the Mystery”
A Study of the Book of Revelation in Five Sessions
For Small Groups and Individuals

Purpose of the Study

This study helps participants to understand the purposes of the Book of Revelation in its setting in the ancient world and to think about how the message of this Book can be of practical help to Christians today. Many contemporary people are mystified—and even afraid of—the Book of Revelation. Yet, a careful look at the images in the Book reveals that the over-arching message is one of encouragement and hope in a time of anxiety. Book of Revelation intends to strengthen the congregations to trust in the purposes of God and to witness faithfully even in the face of threat and conflict. Along the way, of course, this Book does picture some actions of God that trouble many Christians today, and the study opens this for consideration and discussion.

Outline of the Study

The study begins with an introduction to the author of the Book of Revelation and the congregations and cultural context for which the author (John) wrote. The study then moves verse by verse through five passages that represent the main messages of the Book of Revelation:

Session 1. Revelation 1:12-16: vision of the ruling, victorious Christ

<https://vimeo.com/409597587>

Session 2. Revelation 4:1-11: vision of the throne room of heaven

<https://vimeo.com/407917971>

Session 3. Revelation 6:1-17: vision of the opening of the seven seals

<https://vimeo.com/408268323>

Session 4. Revelation 12:18-13:18: vision of the dragon and the two beasts

<https://vimeo.com/408711570>

Session 5. Revelation 21:9-22:5: vision of the new heaven and the new earth.

<https://vimeo.com/408944830>

Study Sessions

The study falls naturally into five sessions. Here is a possible outline for a group meeting or an individual study: (1) begin with prayer, (2) introduce all participants present (for groups), (3) review the introduction to the session in the study guide, (4) watch the video, (5) consider the possibilities for discussion in the study guide, and (6) end with prayer.

The sessions are 20-24 minutes. Each video session is also divided into two parts of about 10-12 minutes each. Groups can watch the whole video session and then have discussion or can divide the video session into two parts and have discussion after each part.

The Leader

The leader is Ron Allen who taught Preaching, and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA for 37 years before retiring. An ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), he is the author, co-author, or editor of more than 40 books, including *I Will Tell You the Mystery: A Commentary for Preaching on the Book of Revelation*, published by Cascade Books in 2019. He has written other books for lay study groups including *A Faith of Your Own: Naming What You Really Believe* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), *The Life of Jesus for Today* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), and *Reading the New Testament for the First Time* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012). His *Thinking Theologically: The Preacher as Theologian* (Fortress Press, 2008) overviews contemporary theological families.

I Will Tell You the Mystery is available from the publisher at <https://wipfandstock.com/i-will-tell-you-the-mystery.html>, or from Amazon at https://www.amazon.com/Will-Tell-You-Mystery-Commentary-ebook/dp/B07YQ7PR5H/ref=sr_1_4?dchild=1&keywords=I+will+tell+you+the+mystery%27&qid=1588341014&sr=8-4.

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Session 1
Introduction to the Series
Revelation 1:12-16
Vision of the Ruling, Victorious Christ

Overview of the Session

This session is in two parts. The first is an introduction to the Book of Revelation with attention to the author (John), the time and circumstances of writing, the churches that received the Book, and the purposes John had in mind. The second part is an image by image study of the first vision in the Book: the one similar to a human being (“one like the Son of Man”).

Brief Background on Revelation 1:16-20

The congregations who first heard this vision towards the end of the first century lived in a world in which Caesar and the Roman Empire insisted they were the most important ruling authorities, and they demanded obedience. By contrast, this first vision in the Book plays on Caesar’s dress to provoke the listener to see Jesus as more powerful than any Caesar. John describes Jesus in elements that work together to create an awesome image of the cosmic power of Jesus.

What is the Big Idea in this Session?

John wants the early churches to believe that the risen, ascended Christ, is more powerful than any Caesar. Consequently, the churches can trust Jesus and can witness faithfully even when Caesar threatens to cause them to suffer or even threatens to put them to death.

Review of Some Important Elements from the Video

Give a brief summary of the meanings of the following in the vision of the ruling Christ:

- a. The “seven golden lampstands”
- b. The designation “one like a human being” (“one like a Son of Man”).
- c. Head and hair “white as wool, white as snow”
- d. The eyes “like a flame of fire.”
- e. The right hand holding seven stars
- f. The “sharp two-edged sword” coming from his mouth

Some Possibilities for Discussion

1. Mention some ways the world in which you live manifests empire tendencies similar and dissimilar to the world of the Roman Empire.
2. Compare ways that your congregation accommodates itself to the empire-tendencies in the world today and how your congregation might more forcefully reject those tendencies and point to the community building ways of God as an alternative way of life.
3. Who are some Caesar-like people, or some Caesar-like realities in your world today?
4. Name three situations in your own life or that of your congregation in which awareness of the Ruling Jesus gives you strength to persevere in the face of Caesar and empire.

Session 2
Revelation 4:1-11
Vision of the Throne Room of Heaven

Overview of the Session

Revelation 4:1-11 is a vision of the throne room of heaven. In this session, the leader explains image-by-image how John intended for people in the congregations to understand it and to apply its implications to their life and witness in the Roman Empire.

Brief Background on Revelation 4:1-11

Many religious traditions in antiquity—including the stream of Judaism to which John belonged—believed that the life of the heavenly world was a pattern for life in the earthly world. In Revelation 4:1-11, the prophet John does not offer a word-picture of the heaven as an actual place but uses symbolism of architecture, furniture, people and creatures to indicate the qualities of life in the world above which undergird the kind of life God wants for people below. To the ancient listener, the throne-room image would immediately call to mind the throne-room of Caesar and would provoke the listener to compare the qualities of life suggested by this image with the idolatrous, exploitative, violent life of the Roman Empire.

What is the Big Idea in this Session?

John wants the congregation to compare the possibilities for life represented by the throne room of God with life under the throne of Caesar, and to commit to the life God makes possible.

Review of Some Important Elements from the Video

Give a brief summary of the meaning of these elements in the vision of the Ruling Christ

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| a. The throne | d. The four living creatures |
| b. The rainbow around the throne | e. The cry “Holy, holy, holy” |
| c. The “sea of glass, like crystal” | f. Casting their crowns before throne |

Some Questions for Discussion

1. Many members in John’s churches were giving up on the hope the world could be more loving and just and were settling for the idea that life in the Roman Empire was all they could expect. Where do you see individuals and congregations, doing something similar today?
2. This vision implies that the deity we worship determines the character of our life. What can we do in the service of worship today to all greater attention to the character of God (and the life God makes possible) in contrast to the worship of Caesar?
3. The elders cast their crowns before the throne, indicating they will use their power to serve the kind of world represented in 4:1-11. How can you cast your crown in a similar way?

Session 3
Revelation 6:1-17
Vision of the Opening of the Seven Seals

Overview of the Session

Revelation 6:1-7 is a vision of the opening of seven seals. In this session, the leader explains how the churches in the first century would have understood the significance of each of the seals.

Brief Background on Revelation 6:1-17

Many Jewish writers who shared John's way of thinking believed that when a community was faithful to God's values and practices, God would bless that community. But, when a community was unfaithful, God would punish that community. The scroll symbolizes God's interpretation of what is happening in history at John's moment. The content of the seals represent social behaviors on the part of the Roman Empire that violate God's purposes and, consequently, will result in punishment. Each seal calls attention to a different aspect of disobedience.

What is the Big Idea in this Session?

John wants the congregation to recognize that the behaviors of the Empire represented in the seals will eventually destroy the Empire and lead to eternal punishment. John wants the congregation to repent of complicity with the empire and to witness to the Realm of God.

Review of Some Important Elements from the Video

Give a brief summary of the meaning of these elements in the vision of the opening of the seals.

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| a. Rider on the first horse | e. The cry of the souls under the altar |
| b. Rider on the second horse | f. The cry of the kings, magnates and
generals |
| c. Rider on the third horse | |
| d. Rider on the fourth horse | |

Some Questions for Discussion

1. John believes that things such as idolatry, violence, and economic disparity violate the kind of communities God wants. Where do you see similar things happening in our world?
2. The saints under the altar cry out for vengeance on the members of the imperial society who have inflicted violence on them. What do you believe about Christians praying for God to inflict suffering actively on others as punishment for their disobedience?
3. Some Christians today believe that a God of unrelenting love would not directly punish communities that are disobedient. But such Christians believe that attitudes and behaviors like those in the seals create social conditions that eventually lead to collapse. Where do you stand—at least for now—in this discussion?

Session 4
Revelation 12:18-13:18
Vision of the Dragon and the Two Beasts

Overview of the Session

Revelation 12:18-13:18 reveals the relationship between the dragon (Satan), the Roman Empire (the first beast) and Roman imperial religion (the second beast). The leader explains these things.

Brief Background on Revelation 12:18-13:18

Many in the Empire believed that the Roman gods had birthed the Empire, divinely willed its repressive social hierarchy, and approved of its violent behavior. The Romans created worship centers throughout the Empire where people swore allegiance to Caesar and gained access to things that came about through the injustice of the Empire. John intends to alert listeners to believe that Satan, the dragon, is the real source of the Roman Empire and its religious practices.

What is the Big Idea in this Session?

John intends for this vision to reveal the sinister character of Rome and to urge the congregation to distance themselves from the Empire and its imperial religious worship. On the positive side, John wants the congregation to embrace the movement towards the Realm of God and to worship the living God. For the deity one worships will shape the world in which one lives.

Review of Some Important Elements from the Video

Give a brief summary of the meaning of these elements in the vision of the two beasts.

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|---|---|
| a. The dragon | d. The second beast looking like a lamb |
| b. The first beast with horns and heads | e. The second beast performing signs |
| c. The mouth uttering haughty words | f. The number 666 |

Some Questions for Discussion

1. Through the first beast. Satan tries to deceive people into thinking he is God by imitating God. Satan promises as good (participating in the Empire) that which leads to destruction. How do you see similar things taking place today?
2. The second beast uses the religious impulse to support the Empire. Do you think of ways some churches today do something similar—that is, support empire tendencies today?
3. The second beast performs the same kinds of dramatic signs as the biblical prophets. How can you tell when a sign serves Satan and the Empire or serves the purposes of God?
4. The mark of the beast is invisible. It is the orientation of the self that comes from worshipping Caesar. The mark of the follower of Jesus is immersion. How does the memory of your immersion help stand against the beasts and worship to living God?

Session 5
Revelation 21:9-22:5
Vision of the New Heaven and the New Earth

Overview of the Session

Revelation 21:9-22:5 uses architectural imagery to describe the qualities of life in the transformed world. The leader will explain each image.

Brief Background on Revelation 21:9-22:5

Christians often think this passage is a photograph of heaven—the world above. Instead, John uses the images of a city to describe “a new heaven and a new earth,” that is, a time when God has collapsed the distinction between heaven and earth into one great transformed community. At one level, then, the vision is a lure to the congregation to turn away from accommodating to the Roman Empire and to keep on the path towards the new heaven and the new earth. At another level, the vision describes characteristics the church should manifest as it embodies the relationships of the new heaven and the new earth in the present. In a figurative sense, the vision is a schematic relational diagram of the new existence already available to the church in the present. By living according to the values of the new heaven and new earth, the church can give the nations a light by which to walk—a model for living in blessing for other communities.

What is the Big Idea in this Session?

John wanted the congregations who received this vision to live together in the ways evoked by the images in the vision. In this way, they offer a life-giving alternative to the death-dealing ways of the Roman Empire.

Review of Some Important Elements from the Video

Give a brief summary of the meaning of these elements in the vision of the opening of the seals.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| a. The great high wall, 144 cubits high | d. The river of the water of life |
| b. The gates always open | e. Nothing accursed found there |
| c. The “pure gold, clear as glass” | f. God’s servants reigning forever |

Some Questions and Issues for Discussion

1. How have you heard Christians and other use the imagery of Revelation 21:9-22:5 in the recent church? How do those uses compare with the way this video interprets the images?
2. How do qualities of life in your present community and compare with life in the new heaven and the new earth.
3. We live in a fractious, polarized world. What does this vision offer to our world?
4. What can you, personally, and your congregation, do to manifest qualities of life more like those in the new heaven and the new earth? How can you bear the fruit of the tree of life?