



**30 DAYS WITH**

the book of

**REVELATION**

**A toolkit for you and your church**

# Introduction to the book of Revelation

Helen Miller

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“Please couldn’t I have just one piece of Turkish Delight to eat on the way home?” “No, no,” said the Queen with a laugh, “you must wait till next time.”

This quote is from C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Edmund has just met the Queen of Narnia and is lured by the promise of Turkish Delight to lead his siblings to her house. Edmund thinks that the Queen will make him heir to her throne, and his siblings duke and duchesses. The reader knows that this is a trap. The Queen is not a benevolent ruler. She is the White Witch who makes it always winter but never Christmas, until Aslan brings her wicked rule to an end.

Lewis’ story is engaging fiction, but it also points to deeper truths. Aslan’s death on behalf of Edmund’s treachery speaks of Jesus’ death to atone for humanity’s sin. Aslan’s resurrection and defeat of the Witch speaks of Jesus’ defeat of sin and Satan. The children’s participation in the battle brings to mind the role that Christians play in the outworking of Jesus’ victory.

Why start a study into Revelation with an overview of a children’s story? Revelation’s vivid and, at times, disturbing imagery can put us off approaching the book. Though called ‘Revelation’ we may wonder if ‘obscuration’ or ‘mystification’ would be a better title! However, imagery can communicate truth in a way that stirs our hearts as well as our minds, so comparing Revelation with Lewis’ story is not a bad place to start.

However, Lewis’ story doesn’t clear everything up. While the image of a witch as an archetype of evil is familiar to us, Revelation’s pictures of beasts, locusts and lampstands may be less familiar and their meaning less clear. How do we make sense of these images? If we can understand what Revelation’s imagery meant to John and the churches he was writing to, we’re better placed to understand how to interpret and apply Revelation today.

## The writer’s cultural context

John, the disciple who Jesus loved, wrote Revelation as part letter and part prophecy, and we need to examine the cultural context that he was writing in. Revelation comes at the end of the Christian canon and John is steeped in the revelation that comes before him. Scripture flows out of John as he translates his vision into written text. To appreciate Revelation’s meaning and richness, we need to read it in light of the biblical texts that John alludes to. John does not simply quote Scripture, however. Rather, he reinterprets Old Testament texts through the lens of Jesus, who is the one to whom the biblical witness points.

Revelation 1:6a provides a good example of this. John alludes to Exodus 19:6 in his description of believers as ‘a kingdom and priests’ (Revelation 1:6), but there are important differences. In Exodus, God addresses a single nation. In Revelation, believers are depicted as coming ‘from every nation, tribe, people and language’ (Revelation 7:9). In Exodus, the promise is conditional and future, ‘if you obey me fully and keep my covenant ... you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19:5-6a). In Revelation, the promise is already achieved, ‘To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father’ (Revelation 1:5b-6a). Promises that the Old Testament looks forward to in hope are achieved in and through the person and work of Jesus. There are ‘now’ and ‘not yet’ elements to this fulfilment. Revelation 2-3 reveal that not all those John is writing to are living faithfully as a kingdom and priests. In addition, although Jesus’ victory is celebrated in Revelation 5, battles rage until the final two chapters.

## The writer’s key message

In the midst of the temptations and challenges that Christians face while living between Jesus’ ascension and future return, Revelation’s readers are called to be victorious. The word victorious comes from the Greek *nikao*,

which can also be translated as conquer, overcome, triumph or prevail. What does it mean to be victorious? The verb *nikao* appears twelve times in reference to believers. The first seven are in Revelation 2-3, where the repeated refrain ‘To the one who is victorious’ is followed by a promised reward for those who persevere. Similarly, in 15:2 and 21:7, those who inherit the New Heavens and New Earth are described as being victorious. In contrast, *nikao* refers in two places to the beasts’ triumph over believers. In 11:7 the beast attacks the two witnesses and kills them. In 13:7 the beasts cause believers to be killed (13:15) and prevent them from buying or selling (13:17). The beasts’ victory is temporary, however. In chapter 11, after being killed, the witnesses are raised to life and taken up to heaven. In chapter 12 the dragon, Satan, whose power lies behind the two beasts, is hurled down from heaven. In 12:11, the nature of the believers’ victory is revealed, ‘They triumphed (*nikao*) over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.’

Therefore, for all the complexities of Revelation’s imagery and structure, its message is clear: be victorious by standing firm in the salvation that comes through Jesus and bearing witness to this salvation whatever the cost. Revelation conveys this message by immersing its readers in an alternative perspective on reality. For the seven churches to whom John wrote, it may have looked as though the fledgling church would not survive, let alone thrive. The threat of persecution loomed and the lure of a conflict-free life tempted believers to compromise their allegiance to Jesus. By revealing reality from God’s perspective, however, Revelation challenges distorted perceptions. It is not the Roman Empire that is victorious, but the Lamb. Believers’ afflictions, though real, are temporary. The White Witch is not to be trusted. The temptation of Turkish Delight is to be resisted. Aslan has triumphed and our allegiance is his.

## WEEK 1

# The Church Then and Now (Revelation 1-3)



Helen Miller

“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.’ (Revelation 1:7)

If we’re not familiar with the books of Daniel and Zechariah, these words may seem quite cryptic. What is the significance of the clouds? Why do people mourn? Examining the Old Testament references clarifies John’s meaning.

### Jesus: The Eternal King

In Daniel 7, Daniel has a vision in which he sees four beasts coming out of the sea. These beasts represent human kingdoms. Though they look powerful, they are cast into the shadows by the vision of the Ancient of Days, surrounded by fire that pours from his throne, with brilliant white hair and clothing (Daniel 7:9-10). Unlike the false pretenders represented by the four beasts, the Ancient of Days is the rightful ruler of his creation. And yet, as the vision continues, Daniel sees that the Ancient of Days is not alone. He is approached by ‘one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven’ (Daniel 7:13). In the Old Testament clouds are associated with God’s presence, for example, when Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai and when the people of Israel are led through the wilderness by a divine cloud. In addition, God is depicted as riding on clouds in the Psalms and prophetic texts (e.g. Psalm 68:4; Psalm 104:3-4; Isaiah 19:1 and Nahum 1:3). Therefore, ‘the clouds of heaven’ indicate the Son of Man’s divine identity; as Tremper Longman

notes, ‘He is riding the cloud chariot, which is the prerogative of God alone.’ (Longman, *Daniel*). The Son of Man is given full authority and receives a kingdom that cannot be destroyed (Daniel 7:14). The eternal and immovable nature of the Son of Man’s kingdom contrasts with the ephemeral rise and fall of the four beasts.

In Revelation, the application of Daniel 7:13 to Jesus reveals that he is the Son of Man with sovereign authority who establishes a kingdom that will never pass away. The rest of Revelation sheds further light on the nature and unfolding of this kingdom.

### PREACHING POINT

How does our hope in God’s kingdom encourage and challenge us in our daily living?

Jesus’ divine identity and sovereign power is highlighted further in the second half of Revelation 1. John’s vision of Jesus draws on language used in Daniel 10 to describe the radiance of an angelic being. In addition, Jesus’ long robe, his white hair and the description of his voice as ‘like rushing waters’ bring to mind Isaiah (6:1), Daniel (7:9), and Ezekiel’s visions of God (Ezekiel 1:24 and 43:2). When Jesus describes himself as ‘the First and the Last’ it tallies with God’s self-designation as ‘the Alpha and Omega ... who is, and who was, and who is to come’ (Revelation 1:8).

### Jesus and the Church then

The divine Son of Man stands among seven golden lampstands, which represent the seven churches to

whom John writes. Though Jesus is the rightful lord of these churches, not all are living in accordance with his kingship. Only the churches in Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (3:7-13) are faithful without exception and are spared Jesus’ rebuke. These churches are praised for their faithful endurance in the face of opposition and persecution. The church in Laodicea (3:14-22) receives only reproach. This church is ‘lukewarm’ which, in contemporary English, brings to mind apathetic indifference. John’s reference is Laodicea’s lukewarm springs, which were useless in comparison to the hot springs at Hierapolis, which were seen to have medicinal benefits, and the cold springs at Colossae, which provided drinking water. The church is ineffective because it fails to recognise its dependence on Jesus (3:17). The churches in Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis receive words of encouragement and reprimand. Ephesus has resisted false teaching but has lost the fervency of its first love (2:1-7). Pergamum has remained faithful through suffering but has not dealt adequately with deceitful doctrines (2:12-17). Thyatira has shown fervency in its service but, like Pergamum, has allowed false teaching to pull people away from truth (2:18-29). Sardis appears to be faithful but, underneath this façade, the church is dead (3:1-6). The church does have some who truly walk with Jesus. As Mitchell Reddish puts it, these faithful Christians provide a faint heartbeat for an otherwise lifeless corpse (Reddish, *Revelation*).



### PREACHING POINT

Which aspects of Jesus' challenge and encouragement to these seven churches most apply to us today?

Richard Bauckham highlights the importance of reading the whole of Revelation as a letter to these seven churches, rather than separating Revelation 1-3 from the rest of the book.

In doing this, attention to the diversity of these seven churches is important. A common perception is that Revelation was written to encourage persecuted Christians to persevere in their faith. This is true, but it is not the whole truth. Not all the Christians John writes to are being persecuted. In fact, the main problems that

Jesus identifies are compromise and complacency. The polytheistic religion of the Roman Empire infiltrated all aspects of life, from the incense offered to gods and goddesses at public celebrations to the rituals that took place within business associations. First century Christians had many opportunities to betray their allegiance to Jesus in order to receive the benefits of the Roman Empire and succeed economically. Therefore, alongside encouraging those facing opposition to persevere, Revelation challenges those who are compromising to repent.

#### Jesus and the Church now

Both Revelation's encouragement and its challenge are important for the church today. For some churches, persecution is devastatingly severe. Revelation encourages these

churches by showing that the power of the beasts opposing them is real, but temporary. The ultimate victory belongs to Jesus and his faithful followers. The New Heavens and New Earth, where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4), is their eternal home. For other churches, the problem is compromise and complacency. Revelation challenges these churches to pay attention to Jesus' call to repent.

How can we respond? Let's pray that, through the grace poured out in Jesus and the power of his Spirit, lost love is reignited, dead hearts are brought to life, deceitful doctrines are challenged, and self-centred dependency replaces prideful, self-sufficiency.

## WEEK 2

# The Triumph of the Lamb (Revelation 4-5)



Helen Miller

'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. 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)

### A change in perspective

On Google Earth you can zoom right in to see where a car park entrance is located or see how nice or not the beach you're planning to go to looks! You can then zoom out so quickly that, in an instant, the beach becomes a tiny dot and the whole

globe spins before your eyes. With a similarly sharp change of perspective, after Jesus' messages to the seven churches, John is taken up to heaven, to the very throne room of God. The beginning of Revelation 4 therefore marks a significant shift in the location of John's vision. However, there is a link: the future enthronement that Jesus promises believers as a reward for perseverance (Revelation 3:31) is shown as a present reality by the faithful elders seated on thrones (4:4).

This continuity between Revelation 3 and 4 is emphasised by John's use of a structural feature that Richard Bauckham calls 'interweaving' (Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*).

Interweaving is when a new section is introduced before the current section ends. The messages to the seven churches conclude with the refrain 'Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (Revelation 3:22). Just before this conclusion, the reward for those who overcome is stated, 'the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne' (Revelation 3:21). The reference to Jesus' throne and to his Father's throne introduces the next section when John's vision lifts from earth to heaven and John sees the Father on his throne (Revelation 4) and the Lamb sharing this throne (Revelation 5).

### Interweaving linking Jesus' promise of a throne with John's vision of a throne

Messages to the seven churches

*God's people*

(3:21) "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne

*Jesus*

(3:22) Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches

(4:1-2) After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven... and there before me was a throne

*The Father*

in heaven with someone sitting on it... (4:4) Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them

*God's people*

were twenty-four elders... (5:6) Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne"

*Jesus*

### PREACHING POINT

In what ways might the praise offered to God and the Lamb in Revelation 4 and 5 inspire our praise in our churches today?

### Look who's in the throne room

The descriptions of God (4:2-7) and the Lamb (5:5-7) in God's throne

room are followed by exclamations and prostrations of praise (4:8-11; 5:8-14). John's throne room vision brings to mind Ezekiel's vision of God (Ezekiel 1). However, there are noticeable differences. Most significant is the new and surprising presence of twenty-four elders, who are also seated on thrones. These elders represent the people of God and their presence in God's

throne room gives us an insight to the blessings that await 'the one who is victorious'. They have won the right to sit with Jesus around his throne, just as Jesus was victorious and sat with his Father on his throne (Revelation 3:21). Perhaps too John's vision of elders on thrones paints a picture of Paul's claims that, even while living on earth, Christians are citizens of heaven (Philippians



3:20) and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6).

#### PREACHING POINT

What are the practical implications of believers' living in light of their heavenly identity?

#### Look who's on the throne

John's vision of the Lamb explains why the elders are in heaven. At the start of Revelation 5, John sees a scroll in God's right hand. As the scroll is unrolled, we see that it contains God's plans and purposes for the world, which include both judgement and salvation. Initially, no one can be found who can open the scroll, leading John to weep. One person's tears alone would not convey the hopelessness that would ensue if God's plans could not be accomplished. Relief comes quickly, however, as one of the elders interjects, 'Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is

able to open the scroll and its seven seals' (Revelation 5:5). Relief turns to surprise as John looks and sees not a lion but 'a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain' (5:6).

Richard Bauckham contends that this contrast between what John hears, the Lion, and what he sees, the Lamb, is central to understanding John's vision (Bauckham, *Theology of Revelation*). The image of the Lion recalls the messianic promise to Judah when, after likening Judah to a lion, Jacob prophesies, 'The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his' (Genesis 49:9-10). The Lion is also identified as 'the Root of David', evoking the messianic hopes of Isaiah 11 where the Messiah is described as a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, from whom comes a branch bearing fruit (Isaiah 11:1). Bauckham argues that this combination of imagery (Lion of Judah and Root of David)

raises expectations for a messianic king who defeats God's enemies in power. Therefore it is surprising that when John turns to look at this roaring lion, he sees a slain lamb. A lamb who triumphs through sacrifice, not force.

We need to consider Jesus' death in light of his resurrection, ascension and future return. We also need to note that, in Revelation, Jesus is presented as judge and king as well as saviour (e.g. Revelation 6:15-17 and 19:11-16). In Revelation 5, however, the focus is on the victory that Jesus achieves through his blood, which has 'purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people and nation' and 'made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God' and 'reign on the earth' (5:9-10). As we'll explore in the next study, from the messages to the seven churches onwards, Revelation reveals what it looks like for God's people to live as 'a kingdom and priests' and share in the Lamb's triumph.

## WEEK 3

# Witness, Worship and Waiting (Revelation 10-13)



Helen Miller

One way to hear what a biblical text is saying is to use colouring pens to highlight different features. In Revelation 10, you could highlight repetition. If you did, you'd spot that there is an angel from heaven (10:1) who has one foot on the sea and the other on the land (10:2). You'd then notice that the positioning of the angel's feet is repeated twice (10:5 and 10:8). You'd wonder why the location of the angel's feet is specified three times. Your curiosity would grow when you noticed that the angel swears by the one 'who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it' (10:6). Why, you'd wonder, is God's kingship over the heavens, earth and land emphasised? When you read on, you'd find out. Two chapters later, John sees a dragon being hurled from heaven (Revelation 12), a beast rising up from the sea and another beast appearing on land (Revelation 13). These ferocious creatures can inflict harm on the Lamb's followers. Even before they appear, however, the angel's location assures the reader of their ultimate defeat by reminding us of God's sovereignty over heaven, sea and land.

### The call to witness

The angel holds a scroll (Revelation 10:2). This scroll connects to the scroll in Revelation 5, which represents God's plans for his creation – the unfolding of his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. John is told to eat the scroll, reminding us of God's command to

Ezekiel (Ezekiel 3) which represents the call for repentance that Ezekiel is to bring. Similarly, the scroll that John eats refers to his role in proclaiming God's kingdom, which includes a call to repentance alongside assurances of hope.

This image of John's witnessing role (Revelation 10) is followed by John's vision of two witnesses (Revelation 11) who are described as 'the two olive trees and the two lampstands.' In Zechariah 4, Joshua (the high priest) and Zerubbabel (who oversaw the temple's rebuilding) are described with similar imagery. In Revelation 1:6 and 5:10, the Lamb's followers are referred to as 'a kingdom and priests'. So it's appropriate that the two witnesses are depicted in language that has previously described a leader and a priest. Although Joshua and Zerubbabel are individuals, the use of the lampstand images in Revelation 2-3 to depict the seven churches suggests that the church is in view. The experience of the witnesses aligns with that of Jesus: they witness, are killed, are raised to life and then ascend (Revelation 11:3-12). Just as Jesus is victorious through his sacrificial witness, so the church participates in Jesus' victory as it bears witness, even when its witness is rejected. The two witnesses' ascension is followed by an earthquake, after which 'the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven' (11:13). Richard Bauckham observes that, following God's judgement earlier on in Revelation, people 'still did

not repent' (Revelation 9:20-21). Following the church's witness, people do repent (Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*).

### Good and bad witnessing

Revelation 2-3 shows that the church's witness is compromised when we allow behaviours that are displeasing to God to take root in our lives. Our witness is also corrupted when we worship other gods. In this regard, in the UK at least, we may not face the same challenges as the Christians John wrote to. For example, we can probably go to our local fete without worrying that we're taking part in a festival in honour of the town's local god or goddess. However, even if the idolatry around us is less obvious, it is just as prevalent. We can be tempted to put God second to our careers, the things we buy, the way we appear to others, physical pleasures, or any other aspect of God's good creation that we give first place to. By the grace poured out through Jesus, and the gift of God's Spirit, we have the hope of forgiveness and transformation. God's Spirit works in us to help us become more Christ-like in our thoughts, desires, words and behaviour. Through the Spirit, we are empowered to be Jesus' witnesses to those around us.

### PREACHING POINT

What forms of idolatry are Christians today most tempted to give in to?



### Witnessing through worship

Alongside bearing witness to Jesus, the church's role involves prayer and praise. If we got out our colouring pens again and went through Revelation highlighting praise passages, we'd see that exclamations of praise punctuate the book.

'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power' (Revelation 4:11).

'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign' (Revelation 11:17).

'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!' (Revelation 19:6-7)

*To give just a few examples!*

Punctuations of praise are also found in Paul's writings. He gets so caught up in the wonder of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done that he launches off into prayer and praise (e.g. Ephesians 1 and 3). This is an excellent model for anyone studying theology! My hope at Moorlands College is that as we (staff and students) read, write essays, teach and mark, we'll be so impacted by God's grace and splendour that we'll be stirred to praise and prayer. Indeed, my hope is that all Christians live day-to-day lives that are filled with praise and prayer.

### Witnessing through patient endurance

The church's role also involves waiting. Revelation 12-13 show the dragon and beasts waging war on the Lamb's followers. The Lamb's followers have the hope of the New Heavens and Earth, where there

is 'no more death or mourning or crying or pain' (Revelation 21:4); but they're not experiencing the fullness of this now. Revelation's call to 'be victorious' includes a call to wait. This doesn't mean that we should stay in situations of suffering or abuse when others can help us move to safety; we should look for support and assistance. The call to wait means that we stand firm in our commitment to Jesus even when the blessings of the New Heavens and New Earth seem far off. It means that we praise God when life is going well and persevere in praise when it's hard. It means that we acknowledge our dependency on God and cry out to him for justice and strength.

### PREACHING POINT

What does this 'call to wait' look like in practice?



## WEEK 4

## Heading Home (Revelation 17-22)



Helen Miller

In Revelation 12, John sees a vision of a pregnant woman about to give birth. He then sees an enormous red dragon standing in front of the woman to devour her son. It seems impossible that the child will survive. When the woman gives birth, however, her son is snatched up to heaven and the woman flees to the wilderness. War breaks out in heaven and the dragon is cast down to earth.

**Cosmic tales of good versus evil**

To the contemporary reader, this imagery seems weird and wonderful. To John's first readers, though, it would have been familiar. The myth of a dragon (or serpent) who tries to kill an infant just after their birth was common in the ancient world. In John's day, the best known version was Python's attempt to kill Apollo. Python's plan is foiled when Apollo's mum is carried to safety. When Apollo is four days old, he tracks down Python and kills him.

Roman emperors were associated with Apollo in imperial propaganda. This association implies that the emperor is the saviour who defeats chaos and evil. In Revelation 12, John's vision challenges this imperial ideology. Jesus is the saviour, not Apollo. In addition, since the images of beasts implicate the Roman empire, not only is the emperor not the saviour, he is on the dragon's side.

The dragon is identified as 'that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray' (Revelation 12:9). This takes us to Eden and the snake's luring of Adam and Eve away from obedience to God (Genesis 3). Deceit is one

of Satan's main weapons, as is emphasised when the beasts appear to form a counterfeit trinity with the dragon. The beast from the sea has a fatal wound that has been healed (Revelation 13:3). In this he parodies the slain Lamb (Revelation 5:6). The beast from the land is a dragon in sheep's clothing (Revelation 13:11). He deceives people and makes them worship the beast from the sea (13:12-14).

Satan's other weapon is accusation (Revelation 12:10). In Zechariah 3, Joshua is wearing filthy clothes. Satan accuses him but is rebuked by God who takes away Joshua's sin and provides clean clothes for him to wear (Zechariah 3:4). Jesus' work in freeing people from their sin is celebrated in Revelation 1:5. Attention to Zechariah 3 suggests that the same truth is also conveyed by the white clothes that the elders, martyrs, multitude and heavenly army wear (Revelation 4:4; 6:11; 7:13 and 19:14).

The celebration of Satan's fall from heaven confirms that his power lies in deceit and accusation. Christians triumph over him 'by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Revelation 12:11). Satan is not done yet, though. He starts 'to wage war against the rest of her offspring – those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus' (Revelation 12:17). John sees him watching a beast arise from the sea and another from the land. Their power doesn't last forever though. The evil characters meet their demise in reverse order to that in which they are introduced. They are defeated

in final battles that are over before they even begin, with the beasts (Revelation 19:19-20) and dragon (Revelation 20:7-10) thrown into the lake of fire. The dragon's demise means that God can now set about the restoration of creation. Before we turn to this, though, there is one other image of evil to examine: Babylon.

**Unpacking the imagery**

The depiction of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 is troubling. Babylon is portrayed as a prostitute who is devoured by the beast. It's an image to handle with care since, without adequate explanation, the Bible could be seen as endorsing abusive violence. It's important to note, therefore, that the image of an adulterous woman or prostitute in the Old Testament is a negative direct comparison to the marriage metaphor that is used to show God's positive relationship with his people (see Hosea in particular). In the marriage metaphor, unfaithfulness to God through idolatry is likened to unfaithfulness to a spouse through adultery. In John's first century Roman world, the prostitute Babylon may also be a parody of the goddess Roma, providing another warning against the pretensions of Roman polytheism and propaganda.

**PREACHING POINT**

How does Revelation's depiction of political power (and its abuse) shape your understanding of God and the life of the church in the world?



The reference to Babylon's wealth and cargos leads Richard Bauckham to see the Roman Empire's economic oppression and injustice implicated (Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*). Chillingly, amongst the list of items traded is 'human beings sold as slaves' (Revelation 18:13). The power of the images in Revelation means that they burst beyond their original context. Readers of all eras can identify the beasts and Babylons of their day, just as John could see his. The challenge is to 'come out of Babylon' (Revelation 18:4), not sharing in her sins. It is important to wrestle through what *coming out of Babylon* might mean for everyday matters such as our shopping habits, political engagements, and what we will and won't watch on TV or look at on the internet.

#### Preparing for a new home

Babylon is juxtaposed with the New Jerusalem. In contrast to Babylon,

the New Jerusalem is described 'as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband' (Revelation 21:2). When John describes what he sees in more detail, however, he depicts not a woman but a giant gold cube (Revelation 21:16). Here, as elsewhere, Revelation is using images to depict profound truths. This image of a cube brings to mind the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and temple. This was the place where God's presence dwelled most tangibly. It was so holy that only the high priest could enter and only on one day in the year, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). In the New Jerusalem, the whole of creation is the Most Holy Place (Revelation 21:22-23).

#### PREACHING POINT

How do we live out the values and characteristics of heaven while living in a broken world?

The pitting of the New Jerusalem against Babylon prompts the question: what does it look like to live as New Jerusalem people while in Babylon? How do we demonstrate the values and characteristics of heaven within a broken world? The defining feature of God's new creation is the intimacy of God's presence with his people: at the heart of being a New Jerusalem person is intimacy with God. As we spend time in God's presence, our hearts begin to break with the things that he is concerned about. Our passion for intercession grows. Our commitment to help those in need increases. Our desire to share the good news of Jesus in action and words is fuelled. We find ourselves crying out with John, 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Revelation 22:20).

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Bible Month provides a toolkit for you and your church to engage with the book of Revelation over four weeks. It includes Bible notes with preaching ideas; small group study guides, all age resources; a reflection on what Revelation says about the love of life; and suggestions for further study.

Written by Dr Helen Miller (Bible notes) with Gail Adcock (all age material), Abi Jarvis (study guides), Michael Wadsworth (further study) and a reflection by Rev Dr Gary Hall.

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