

The Conquering Christ

A study on the Book of Revelation

Introduction

In Angers Chateau in France there is a large tapestry measuring about 100 meters long and 4.50 metres high. It was commissioned in 1375 by Louis 1, Duke of Anjou, and was probably completed in 1382. It is called the Apocalypse tapestry. It is an interpretation in illustration of the book of Revelation, which we will have a look at ourselves over these next 6 studies. It would be fair to say that the Book of Revelation has been the subject of curiosity, and speculation for as long as it has been written. The book is both challenging and difficult to read, and yet also fascinating and amazingly insightful. Folk when they come to the book of revelation in my opinion make one of two responses. Sadly both of which I feel can be unhealthy.

Firstly there are those who become obsessed with the book. They treat it like a prophetic jigsaw puzzle that will give them some kind of insider information if only they can put all the pieces together. They tend to write up intricate time lines and diagrams. It was the 20th Century author G. K. Chesterton who wrote. 'Though St John saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creatures so wild as one of his own commentators' [a commentator is a person who writes an explanation of a Biblical book].

Jesus stated very clearly that he would be coming back. Jesus says very clearly 'He who testifies to these things says, Yes, I am coming soon. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.' Rev 22 v 20 But we can't know for sure when he will return. 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority' Acts 1 v 7.

Secondly, those who avoid the book of Revelation altogether, either out of frustration or confusion. They are repulsed by the violence, the bizarre imagery, and the whole thing seems less than enlightening to them. They argue that the book does seem like a happy book to read. Because they can't understand what it is saying, they prefer to set it aside and not grapple with it. Sadly, such folk are missing out on some powerful lessons God wants to teach us through this book.

The best course I feel is to recognise that Jesus doesn't want us to engage in wild speculation and date setting, yet neither does he wish us to be ignorant about any portion of the Bible.

What I hope is that as we go through these studies we will seek a humble and biblical stance as we look at this portion of the Scripture. It is not my purpose to try and figure out what is reserved for God alone to know, but we shall seek the help of the Holy Spirit to enable us to be people who are ready to meet Jesus whether that be today, or a thousand years from now. So after what was a longer introduction that I anticipated, let's start the study.

NOTES:

Study 1 The Cosmic Christ

Years ago we took our three children Liz, Hannah and Tim, several miles to an Italian Ice-cream Shop. There were literally hundreds of flavours on offer. Our son Tim, stood in the centre of the shop, while the girls were looking at all the different flavours, and simply said without a thought. 'I'll have vanilla'. Now there is nothing wrong with vanilla ice-cream. But where is the willingness to be surprised by the tastes of something different? Vanilla ice cream was what he knew, and he was staying with it. No element of risk. So if you have never looked at the book of Revelation before then enjoy the risk.

Making a connection

1. Can you tell of a time you took a risk, tried something new, or made an effort to be adventurous?

Making a Biblical connection.

Read Revelation Ch 1 v 1-8

2. The word Revelation means 'an act of unveiling or a disclosure.' What is unveiled about Jesus Christ in these opening verses?

3. Imagine you are a Christian living in the 1st century and you hear these eight verses. What would a Christian understand about Jesus, especially from verses 4-8?

4. How does your understanding of Jesus give hope to you today?

Any study of Revelation is helpful to us today for 3 reasons.

Firstly, we come face to face with the realities of the battle between good and evil.

Secondly, we are gripped by the realities of heaven and hell. Thirdly we are confronted with the glorious triumph of Jesus. At a time of intense persecution John wrote these words to seven Church fellowships, to increase their confidence in Jesus.

Read Revelation Ch 22 v 7 and v 12-21.

5. In the light of Jesus' words [v 7] and John's words [v 18-19], how would you respond to a follower of Christ who said. 'The book of Revelation is too hard to understand, I don't think I want to bother reading it and trying to figure out what it means for my life.'

6. Jesus paints a picture of those who are inside and those who are outside his heavenly city [v 12-15]. What are some of the contrasts you see between those who are inside, and those who are outside of the kingdom of God?

7. What do you learn about the identity of Jesus Christ in verses 12-16? Why would these attributes of Jesus offer comfort for Christians in a time of persecution?

Making a practical connection

8. As we go through Revelation it becomes clear that there is no middle ground between being inside the kingdom of God or outside of it. Either being united with God or separated from him. Identify one act of love and care you extend to a friend who is not a follower of Christ, and ask that the Holy Spirit may infuse your actions with His power so that this friend will begin to experience the love of Christ for themselves.

9. Revelation part of the Scriptures and 2 Timothy 3 v 16 reminds us that all Scripture is useful either for either teaching, rebuking, correcting, training or equipping us. We all need helpful mutual encouragement in making regular time to study God's word. Can you talk as a group about how you can serve each other by mutual accountability in how you work through this study on Revelation.

Study 2 The Pictorial Christ

None of us want to misread the Bible, so if we want to understand the Bible with minimal distortion, we must learn to recognise and understand the figurative use of symbolism and metaphor throughout. Sometimes we can get so caught up with the pictures in the Bible that we fail to recognise the richness of the meaning behind the picture. When Jesus said, 'I am the gate', this does not mean that Jesus is a literal gate with hinges and a handle. It is a metaphor a way of expressing that his words, life, death, resurrection is a gateway to God. If we interpret the book of Revelation carefully and responsibly, it will begin to make sense and transform our lives, and there will be a minimum of distortion between what John wrote and how we understand it, so that we avoid a communication breakdown. If we attempt to plough through Revelation without a good interpretation we will have continual communication distortion and breakdown.

Making a connection.

1. Can you identify a time when you experienced some kind of breakdown in communication where the words of the sender were different than the understanding of the receiver.

Making a Biblical connection

Read Revelation Ch 1 v 12-20

2. What is one image or object in this passage that jumps out at you and how does it help you understand the person and character of Jesus?

Have a look at Daniel Ch 7 v 9-10 & 13 and Ch 10 v 5-6. Of whom is Daniel speaking?

3. According to Rev Ch 1 v 12-20 Christ has all authority. Over what does He have authority?

4. What is one way God is speaking with authority into your life, and what are you doing to walk in obedience to His Word?

John uses numbers as a form of symbolism in Revelation. Sometimes the numbers are literal, like seven Churches. Sometimes they are symbolic, like seven also means in Hebrew perfect. The number twelve also represents the idea of fullness.

The number 666 is probably the best known in Revelation. This number refers to opposition to Christ. The idea comes from Exodus Ch 13 v 9. Where the idea is that the sign on the hands and forehead is about commitment to God.

Read Revelation Ch 13 v 11 to Ch 14 v 1

5. What contrast do you see between those who have their minds and thought processes marked by Christ, and those whose thinking is marked by Satan?

6. What contrast do you see between those who have their hands and actions marked by Christ and those whose actions are marked by Satan?

Read Psalm 46 v 1-3 & 6, Revelation Ch 6 v 12-17

7. What do you learn about the power and character of God in these passages?

Often we use language, which does not mean like the Psalmist in psalm 46 that the earth actually breaks up and sinks into the sea, but might well mean that 'our world has been shaken to its foundation' or that 'the sky has fallen in on us'. John was writing to a Church which was facing persecution from the Romans. What he is saying to the people is that although it may look like the whole world is in the hands of the Roman Government, one day God will raise his hand all things will be turned upside down. It is interesting that in Revelation that the catastrophic events that seem frightening and bad to us were generally intended to be a source of confidence to the church.

8. So imagine that you are having a conversation with a friend who lives with great fear of natural disasters. In the light of John's vision of God in Revelation, what might you say to this person?

John uses images of animals to convey things with power, and an exuberant confidence in God. Each of the creatures in Revelation helps paint a picture for us of the message God wants to communicate

Read Revelation Ch 5 v 4-6

9. What are some of the radical contrasts between the two creatures [animals] in the passage, and how do they help us form a fuller picture of Jesus?

10. Can you offer how you have experienced Jesus as

a. The triumphant Lion of Judah in your life?

b. The sacrificial Lamb of God?

c. How can these two images of Jesus affect the way you worship?

Making a practical connection

11. Can you begin to identify one way you can bear the mark of Jesus on your hands by serving him this week?

12. Take a moment to evaluate the actions of your hands. Can you this week add one action which honours Christ, and commit to stopping one action that is dishonouring to Christ?

Study 3 The Enthroned Christ

Back in the 17th Century Louis the XIV set to work on his Palace of Versailles. By 1635, 36,000 men were working both day and night on the building. In Revelation Ch 4 we get a glimpse of what heaven will be like

Making a connection.

1. Describe one of the most amazing buildings you have ever seen or been in. How did it feel when you were in this building?

Making a Biblical connection.

John's purpose in Revelation Ch 4 is to give us a taste of the majesty, wonder, splendour and awe of the God we serve.

Read revelation Ch 4 v 1-11

2. This vision is meant to awaken our senses, so describe one of the following

- a. What do you see in the vision?
- b. What do you hear in the vision?
- c. What do you feel as you reflect on the vision?

3. The centre of the vision is God Almighty. What do you learn from it about the One who sits on the throne?

4. How does this picture compare with other images of God you know about [Father, Friend, Forgiver, Saviour]?

Read Revelation Ch 4 v 1-3

5. Imagine you are reading this passage to a group of small children, and you have to explain what each image means. What would you say to help them understand about the one who is on the throne?

6. How does this picture in Revelation Ch 4 communicate the character of God?

7. Can you identify one area of your life where you are struggling today and need to see a vision of God who is majestic and faithful?

The number 7 in Revelation is about completeness. So here John is writing about the utter completeness, sufficiency, and power of the Holy Spirit. In Revelation the sea is thought to represent the majestic transcendence of God. The overall picture is one of sheer power, the omnipotence of God.

Consider verses 4-6

8. Pick out one of the images in this passage and reflect on how that particular word-picture gives you insight into the power of God.

9. The imagery in this passage includes the Holy Spirit v 5. Why do you think that the Holy Spirit is mentioned here?

10. How does experiencing God's power help you draw closer to Him as a worshipper?

Making a practical connection

11. Can you offer a time when you experienced God's majesty and faithfulness breaking into your life?

Can you take some time as a group to celebrate God's faithfulness in the lives of the members of the group.

12. In this study we have thought about worship. We live in a frenzied, high-paced world, so, this week can you pray about how you can serve someone by getting close to them and helping them slow down a little, so that they can either remove Sunday pre-worship busyness, or even begin to think about the idea of worshipping God in their life.

Study 4 The Dividing Christ

It could be argued that the first five minutes after birth might be the most exciting five minutes of life. Well the book of Revelation offers us the first five minutes after death. Many have attempted to penetrate the veil of what happens after death, here God offers us what lies on the other side.

Making a connection.

1. None of us can remember the first five minutes of life, out of the womb, and as yet we can only imagine the first five minutes after life ends. As you look over your life and all the time that lies between these two events, can you tell about a time you recall with great joy and excitement.

Making a Biblical connection

Read Revelation Ch 14 v 1-5

In this part of the vision John talks about a mass of people 144,000. There is some disagreement about what this group represents, but I feel that it is symbolic way of talking about all the people of God. I believe that this number represents the fullness of God's people gathered together before their God. The number is again symbolic.

2. Imagine yourself as one of this mass of people. What do you hear, see, feel happening around you?

3. Take one of the images below and talk about what you think it means.

- a. The name of the Lamb and His father written on their foreheads
- b. The sound of rushing waters, thunder, and the playing of harps
- c. The singing of a new song

4. How do you think you are experiencing God's blessing in your life right now?

Read Revelation 14 v 6-12

John paints a picture of contrasts between being in the presence of God, and being in a place where 'God is not there.' John offers us a mirror opposite picture of a state of eternal condemnation to eternal blessing.

5. What do the various images of judgement in this passage communicate about the eternal condition of those who reject Christ?

6. Imagine you could spend one minute witnessing what happens to this group of people. How might that minute change one of the following for you.

- a. The way you pray for people in your life who are not followers of Christ?
- b. The way you communicate your faith to others?
- c. The way you reach out to seekers who visit Church?

7. What are some of the ways you could respond to a person who tells you they look forward to hell because they want to spend eternity just hanging out with their friends'?

Read Revelation Ch 14 v 14-20 and Matthew Ch 9 v 35-38

8. What contrasts do you see between the harvest Jesus describes in Matthew and the harvest John describes?

9. Have your group used the study material which TVBF have produced called 'Sharing God's good news naturally'? Why not either encourage individuals to have a look at it, or study it as a group. Or do a refresher on it. It may help you recognise a potential spiritual area of service.

Making a practical connection

One of the greatest acts you can extend to another person is to communicate your faith in a natural and clear way. Why not commit yourself to going through an evangelism-training course at least every 3 years.

Commit yourself to pray that God will raise up workers who will take God's good news to others. But be sure that as you pray that God will give you boldness as He sends you to bear witness for Him.

Study 5 The Protective Christ

The challenge of 'extreme sports' calls for a serious amount of risk taking. People who engage in such sports have the sense that life was not meant to be bland or routine, but rather to be enjoyed with a pulse-pounding intensity. Not all of us will ever attempt an extreme sport, but we all can enter the realm of extreme spirituality. The picture we get of Christ in the Revelation is that of extreme beyond description. In Revelation we get a picture of a radical God who invites us to live in the edge of excitement as we discover extreme faith

Making a connection.

1. If you could try anything and know you would not be injured or embarrassed, what would you try and why would this be exciting for you?

Making a Biblical connection

Everyone hungers to be known, celebrated and loved. The vision God gives John is one of great intimacy with himself. The centre of this intimacy was established at the hill called Golgotha, and here in Revelation we see the reality of that intimacy

Read Revelation Ch 19 v 1-10

2. What are some of the things that the people in heaven do and say that reveal a deep level of intimacy with God?

3. Imagine a person whose idea of heaven is sitting on a cloud and praying silently. How does John's vision of heaven in this passage shatter that tame view of what eternity with God will be like?

4. If you can talk about one of your most extreme spiritual experiences and how it helped you understand God's desire to be in an intimate relationship with you

Today we have different ways of determining who holds the authority in a given situation. It can be the number of stripes on a uniform, the biggest office, or who holds the TV remote in the room. When it comes to the Universe God holds the remote

Read Revelation Ch 19 v 11-16

5. How do you see the extreme authority of God revealed in the images and symbols in this passage?

6. Identify one image in the passage, which strikes a chord for you. How can holding onto this image impact the way you obey God's leading in your life?

7. If you were to give God complete authority in one of these areas in your life, how might things change for you?

In your professional life

In your home

In your free time

In your use of personal finances

In your friendships

In Revelation 19 we see a picture of great joy, but also a picture of great pain. The same God who offers intimacy also bring judgement on all who reject his offer of salvation

Read Revelation Ch 19 v 17-21

8. What pictures of judgement does John paint? What helps you gain confidence as you read this description of God's victory over evil?

9. How do you feel when you realise that this judgement will fall on real people?

10. In the light of this sobering reality of God's coming judgement on those who don't have faith in Jesus Christ, what can you do as a small group to bear a more clear and extreme witness to your faith in Jesus Christ?

Making a practical connection

11. Can you offer suggestions as to how our church can do a better job of communicating the message of Christ in a culturally relevant and warmly inviting manner so spiritual seekers?

12. Can you suggest some steps we can take as a church to be more sensitive to those who are not yet in the family of God and let them know that they are welcome at TVBF?

13. Can you identify one way that you help make TVBF a warmer and more inviting place for those who are spiritual seekers?

14. Can you think of one way that your group can take one action in the coming weeks to actively work at creating an atmosphere of acceptance and love for those who are spiritually seeking?

Session 6 The Welcoming Christ

People sometimes wonder what heaven will be like, and what they will do. It was the 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who wrote that 'it would be unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell'. Well in Revelation chapters 21 and 22 we are given a wonderful picture of the new heaven and the new earth, but it seems very likely that when the new heaven and the new earth actually breaks, we shall have the surprise of our life.

Making a connection

1. When you were a child, what did you imagine heaven would be like?
2. How has your vision of heaven changed over the years?

Making a Biblical connection

Read Revelation Ch 21 v 1-7

3. This passage reveals a very busy and active God. What do you learn about God in the following areas
 - a. What He is doing in this heavenly vision
 - b. What He is saying to His children
 - c. What His character is like
4. In the light of God's character as well as what He is doing and saying in this passage, describe as best you can the God we will meet face-to-face when this life ends.
5. What images and pictures in this passage give you a sense of the joy we will experience when we are in heaven?
6. If God is the same yesterday, today and forever, we don't therefore have to wait until we get to heaven to experience His joy. Can you identify one area of your life in which you are experiencing the joy of God right now?

The American Author Dallas Willard writes 'In heaven you will know fullness of function, the unending creativity involved in cosmic wide co-operative pursuit of a created order that continuously approaches but never reaches the limitless goodness of the triune personality of God.' That's the promise of what we will be part of in eternity.

Read Matthew Ch 25 v 14-30 and Revelation Ch 22 v 5

7. In this parable in Matthew, how does Jesus connect our productivity in this life and our productivity in the life to come?
8. Many people envision heaven as eternal retirement. How do you feel when you think about heaven including fruitful, meaningful, productive labour?

9. If you can tell about one of the spiritual gifts or abilities you have and how you are developing it and investing it for the Lord?

10. What can you do in the coming year to sharpen this ability and use it more fruitfully for the Lord?

Read Revelation Ch 21 v 22-27

11. What contrast do you see between the darkness of John Ch 3 v 19-20 and the eternal light of Revelation Ch 21 v 22-27?

Making a practical connection

12. God wants to shine His light on every area of darkness in our lives. He does not want to wait till our life ends. What is one area of darkness in your life where you want to see God shine His light?

13. How can the members of your group pray for you as you seek God's transforming power in this area of your life?

14. Take time over the next few days to think about how in your workplace that you can have the heart of a servant, so that others can see Christ in you.