

Revelation

The Vision of John

“How big is your God?”

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Spring Cluster Course WEEK 1: Jesus, Lord of All

REVELATION 1:1-19: How big is your God?

This chapter shows us Jesus as He is in glory, rather than as He was when walking around Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee. The theme we want each one of us to address is ‘How big is your God? Or how small is He? There is a song it would be brilliant to use if you can track it down: ‘Be Magnified,’ by Lynn DeShazo (Ready Writer Music, 1992, 1995. www.lynnndeshazo.com). It begins: “I have made You too small in my eyes; o Lord, forgive me.”

We suggest that for this session you choose choruses that reflect the glory and the Lordship of Jesus: perhaps the song ‘At your feet we fall, mighty risen Lord,’ or ‘The Splendour of the King,’ or ‘Be Magnified.’

Supplies List:

- 2 Bibles (1 for focal point)
- Notes for presentation
- Prepared handout for individual response (see page 3)
- Pens and pencils
- Magnifying glass, small table
- 7 candles, matches
- 2 or 3 people prepared to share (see page 3)

OPTIONAL VISUAL FOCAL POINT: On a small table, arrange a magnifying glass atop an open Bible with 7 lit candles nearby. If a mirror can be propped behind them, or a mirror tile placed beneath to double the reflection, so much the better.

Have someone read Revelation 1:1-19 aloud.

INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

On the Roman penal island colony of Patmos, the Lord Jesus appeared in His glory to His faithful servant John. What John experienced broadened

His vision: first of Jesus Himself; and then of the events that were shortly to come across the face of the world; and finally, the response the Lord was looking for from His people.

We are going to be following in the footsteps of John on Patmos, whose lonely exile was interrupted by a dramatic vision of the Lord Jesus as He is in glory. The Lord also addressed seven messages to seven of the local churches, and it is these that we are going to primarily focus on. As we explore various aspects of these messages, we will see what the Lord is saying to us as individuals and as Clusters as well as heeding the wisdom that speaks to the church in every generation.

The book of Revelation completes the Bible. To put that the other way round, the Bible would be incomplete without it. As surely as we need Genesis to understand how things were at the very beginning, so we need the book of Revelation to understand where history is heading. Genesis and Revelation both take us far beyond information we can acquire by our own knowledge.

It is important not to be put off the book of Revelation it contains sections that we find difficult to understand. Although we are going to be concentrating on the opening chapters, it is helpful to be aware of what is coming afterwards. Read basic introductions such as David Pawson's *Unlocking the Bible* (Collins) to give you a feel and a flavour of it, as well as providing a few keys for understanding it better.

The central message of the Revelation is that the Lord Almighty reigns – but those who follow the Lamb will continue to experience immense conflict with the one who is described as the 'prince of this world.' The Book of Revelation provides profound insight into the nature of the battle and the tactics of the enemy, as well as details of his final overthrow. Revelation is the only book that signposts its own importance, in the sense of warning people neither to add to it nor to take away from it.

INTO THE PAST

The effect of the vision on John

In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there is a delightful moment when Trumpkin the dwarf, who claims not to believe in lions, meets the mighty Aslan. The little man is immediately humbled and converted! His view, up until then, had just been prejudiced opinion.

Many of us have a mental picture in our heads that is a hangover from Victorian Sunday schools: 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.' As we read the opening chapter of Revelation together, may the Lord dispel that image once and for all. Even John was awed by seeing Jesus in yet more glory and majesty than he had witnessed on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Matt. 17:2).

John had also been with Jesus in His resurrection state. But now he is given an even fuller revelation of the glorified Son and falls down as a dead man at the feet of Jesus. This is no "neat experience to be sought after but rather a transforming encounter with the majesty of our Lord . . . which brings fresh life to his whole being and gives him assurance and hope as he confronts the crisis of his day (Scotty).

John has heard Jesus say do not be afraid before late one night on the storm tossed Sea of Galilee.' This is the great message of encouragement throughout the book of Revelation.

The absent Author and the ever-present God

My own feeling is that the author was the apostle John, who was Jesus' closest disciple. John reputedly served in the church in nearby Ephesus, along with Mary, Jesus' mother. If the author was someone else, he was certainly a reputable prophet with a wide following in the region.

Scholars have pointed out that the style differs from John's gospel and epistles – but if you were grabbing a few moments to scribble down an unforgettable but almost impossible to describe revelation, on your day off from convict labour, you might not be writing in your normal style either. After all, John was simply the messenger, describing what he had seen and heard in these visions.

The book of Revelation is so Christ-centred that we hardly get a glimpse of the author's own plight or feelings. But John was human and we can speculate . . . Intimate friend of Jesus, beloved church planter – and now just a number in the crushing Roman penal regime, he would have been less than human if the weight of this exile had not weighed heavily upon him.

'Ah,' the devil might have sneered, 'that's what comes of following Christ. He's always got a cross lined up somewhere ahead to impale you on!' But in the paradoxical world of God's upside down kingdom, the Cross is the place of fulfilment. God had lovingly weighed everything for John, just as He does for all of us. So far from being a siding or a sideline, what John

experienced on Patmos would represent the crowning point of his life: the moment when he would see the Lord Jesus no longer with the eyes of the flesh but as He really is – the King of Kings and the Lord of Glory.

Jesus as He really is

What we see here is a very different side to Jesus than that which the gospels present us with. There we see Him reaching out to sinners, His eyes of love forgiving sinners and melting hearts.

Here we see Jesus as Lord and King. The emphasis is on majesty rather than on intimacy. His eyes are like flaming fires, and His voice like the sound of many rushing waters. Think of the most powerful waterfall you have ever stood beside and you will realise that we are speaking here of something very different from the still small voice which we know and love so well.

Isn't this all rather a frightening picture? Yes and no. Yes for those who persist in their own ways, it is a terrifying sight, for it emphasises that God will brook no rival, and favour no unbelief. But for those of us who know and love Him, it is the completion of our understanding: love without judgement would be merely sentimentality. Jesus came full of grace and truth.

Spiritual matters are not a light appendage to make the rest of our life comfortable: we are dealing here with eternal realities. It is our life that needs to come into line: it is not the Scriptures that need to conform to our desires.

INTO THE PRESENT

Issues to Ponder

In Psalm 50:21 the Lord laments because people tend to think of Him as though He were just like us. As this passage shows, He is not! In what ways is our vision of Jesus too small?

*Option: Consider inviting two or three people to prepare a few thoughts before the meeting on the following questions, using the first one now, the second one later in the meeting (as noted further on). Others can also share at the time if desired.

1. What experiences have you had that show you the greatness and the Almightyness of God?

2. (For later in the meeting) What do the eyes, feet, and the sword speak to you of?

The God who speaks

God loves to communicate with His people! Before he sees anything, John hears a voice behind him. The whole focus of the Book of Revelation is that 'a voice came from heaven.' But for that, there would have been no revelation of Jesus in His Glory, let alone any unfolding of events that were still to come. Wouldn't it be boring if the Lord never spoke! Whether life-changing visions, or simple steering touches, or nudges towards particular people or courses of action, His direct involvement in our lives makes all the difference to our ability to function for Him.

***Option: If time allows, invite people to respond to this, out loud or on paper.** What has He been showing you recently? Ponder and reflect. It may have happened so quietly that you have not even recognised it as the voice of the Lord. See if there are any promises to take hold of, any patterns to note, any challenges to face, any nudges to follow up, any matters to put right.

The God who is always doing something new

If ever there was a man who was using to hearing the voice of the Lord, it was John. But the nature of this revelation was utterly different from anything he had known before. Even he had to turn round to see who it was who was speaking to Him!

At 'Patmos' times in our life, when we feel 'set aside,' it is very easy to develop a survival mentality. We begin thinking and acting defensively, more concerned to hang on to what we have already got than to explore new avenues. But God can break through at any moment! Who says that we are too old to learn new things once we are the wrong side of 40, 60 or 70?

Do you remember how God drew Moses' attention to the burning bush? Moses went across to have a look at the strange sight. He 'turned aside to see,' as one translation puts it. It is so important for us to be willing to go across and have a look when we think God may be calling us to something new. Not impulsively or naively, but with an open, prayerful heart.

God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, but he didn't then proceed to make a doctrine out of an experience, and insist that anyone who entered his leadership team must have a similar experience!

It is rare that we see burning bushes – but whenever we see signs of God's fire, we must be quick to head in that direction – and to fan back into flames those fires that have all but gone out. He who restores someone to wholehearted discipleship has done something of eternal merit.

INTO THE WORD

What John saw

What did John see? Seven golden lampstands, which represented the seven churches. John also saw the Son of Man Himself, utterly different in appearance from the Lord Jesus whom John had shared his life with for so many years. Here is Jesus, risen and glorified, no longer a humble carpenter amongst the artisans of Galilee, but clothed in glory and full of wisdom, power, and might. He is Light and Brilliance, and Glory everlasting.

May the Lord expand our hearts to be able to contain and to reflect more of His presence.

In the Lord's sight the Church is so much more than an arbitrary collection of human beings who happen to come together for a season and co-exist as pew-fillers, worship leaders and PCC members. Jesus is and must always be the Head of His Church, each 'branch' of which will have its own special characteristics.

Sometimes the Holy Spirit comes to His people as it were on tiptoe, longing to lead and direct, but we have got every slot and minute accounted for, and there is no room for His Spirit to move. Worship Him in the beauty of reverence – and give Him time and space in which to touch our hearts and make His will known to us.

In His right hand, Jesus held seven stars, symbolic of the seven churches He would shortly address. But what is this coming out of Christ's mouth? It's a sword! Not a sword safe within its scabbard, nor yet being wielded in His hand, this sword represents the Word of God by which the stars were made, and cripples walked. It is not a comforting image. It is the double-edge sword which divides between flesh and spirit, and which exercises His judgement against those who lead His precious children astray.

For unbelievers this judgement is terrible and it is to be greatly feared, for there is no appeal against it. For us too, there are seasons of chastising. But the Sword has an entirely different intention when it is pointed at us: it is a work of refining rather than of destruction. The sword is a reminder that we shall reap as we sow, for good or ill, and that nothing escapes His all-seeing eye.

***Option: Use the response to the second question now. Others can also share at this time if desired.**

2. What do the eyes, feet, and the sword speak to you of?

Had John's revelation ended with the sword image, we would have been left with the idea of judgement uppermost in our minds, but remember the starting point: Jesus is speaking grace and peace to His people (1:4). God, therefore, allows John to look upon the face of the Risen Lord, bright-shining as the sun. The sun, in all its fiery brilliance, is the nearest we can get to a picture of Christ's pre-eminence and glory.

What effect did this vision have on John?

We have seen that John fell before the Lord as though dead. This is the beginning of real worship, worship in spirit and in truth. Look how the Lord Jesus introduces himself. He could have said, 'Oh hi, John, it's nice to catch up with you. It's Me again; I'm sorry you haven't seen much of Me whilst you've been on Patmos. I've been a bit caught up, sort of, sorting out the Corinthian church. Hope you still recognise Me!'

Not a bit of it. This is a power encounter of the highest prophetic kind; this is the reality of knowing and fellowshiping with the High King of Heaven, who oversees and ordains the powers of the age to come.

I am the Living One; I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

How should we respond to such a revelation?

If it should happen to you, as it does to most of us on various occasions in our lives, that you feel pole-axed by an overwhelming awareness of your failures and short-comings, don't rest until you have thrown yourself on the Lord's mercy. You can never lose out by yielding to the Lord. It is the only place in the world where you win by giving in!

It is so easy to say, 'If only such and such wasn't happening, then everything would be perfect.' It is a dangerous line to go down, because it leads to us feeling dissatisfied with the way things are – and from there to a general moaning and complaining. As JB Phillips put it, 'It's hard to worship a disappointment!'

If you are feeling as though the circumstances of your life are in some way lacking or out of order, take heart: the Lord is still overseeing the details carefully. It is a sign of real fruit if you can say, 'These are the good old days right now. Not just five, ten, twenty years ago, but right now. You, Lord, are leading us and blessing them.' Or to put it as King David did (and remember, he knew more about the vicissitudes of life than any of us): 'the boundary lines have fallen for me in a goodly place.' Psalm 16:6

INTO THE HEART

I wonder what Patmos represents to you? Is it being the only Christian in your family, or Coping with a non Christian partner? Or feeling your age acutely? Or a difficult work or family environment? A broken relationship or some other loss? Some other obstacle that is looming large on your horizon?

There are so many ways in which we can feel cut off or exiled – it requires patience to cope with them. Can you turn 'loneliness' into 'solitude?' (i.e. consciously seeking to be with the Lord). If we simply feel sorry for ourselves or 'insist on our rights,' we will never experience what God intends us to experience during these periods. In solitude however, we can experience a fresh vision of Christ and truly know Him, rather than just know about Him. May the Lord keep our spirits sweet rather than full of self-pity and resentment. (Even too much self-analysis can lead nowhere fast.)

Is your mind cluttered with too much 'chatter?' May the Lord clear it so that you can focus on Jesus as He really is. With every problem there will also always be a solution. Sometimes we have to turn around to face the Lord as John had to turn around (1v12a), rather than keeping our eyes focused on the problem.

Patmos may be a season in your life, a prolonged season even, rather than any one specific difficulty. All the sweetness and the joy of the Lord's comfort and presence feel far removed from you. It may mean the death of

some cherished hope or dream; things not working out as you had expected them to. It may mean friends moving away or passing on to glory. It may mean the loss or overthrow of all sorts of things – but it does not mean the loss of your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

At any moment God can break through again. In the meantime, don't despise the many day to day blessings that are still yours.

Don't assume your contribution doesn't amount to much just because it doesn't have a string of 0's after it. God delights to use the apparently insignificant. Even the most prestigious president of a multi-national corporation is usually only known and revered in his lifetime. By comparison, Jesus remains the most important man in the universe – and in His eyes we are important. While others mourn the passing of time, we have a glorious future to look forward to. He has promised to come back and take us to be where He is! (John 14:3)

Incidentally, John is considered to have been about 90 when he had this vision. Forget any idea that it is only the young who are the spiritual movers and shakers! The devil loves to make us think we are too young, too old, or too *something* to be used!

You never know what God can do in your life until you hand everything back to Him and agree that you will serve Him unreservedly, no matter what He allows or where He sends you. The Lord knows what He is doing – and He will reward your service!

The first thing that happens on 'Patmos' is that we lose much of our independence. Imagine John arriving on the island. All the freedom of movement he had known has now, in a moment of time, been taken from him. No longer is he the focus of everyone's respect and admiration. Translate these thoughts into your own experience. How do you handle times of loss? Are you still trying to hang on to something that has been taken from you? Or can you accept and even welcome them? We quoted earlier from David in Psalm 16. Let us look at that passage in more detail.

Lord, You have assigned me my portion and my cup; You have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance. I will praise the Lord, who counsels me: I have set the Lord always before me. Because He is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because You will not abandon me to the grave ... You have

made known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand. (From Psalm 16)

***Option:** Invite people to write a letter to the Risen Lord, describing how they feel about things mentioned in the meeting and, if they feel ready, re-consecrating their lives to him.

Close with prayer and perhaps one of the songs from the beginning of the meeting.

Appendix

There have been countless 'schemes' for understanding the book of Revelation. Suffice it for the moment to remember that the basic rule for interpreting Scripture is that an idea should be considered to be literal unless there is a clear reason why it should not be. One of the Greek words used in the opening verse in Chapter 1 is that the Lord intended to 'show' his servant what was soon to take place. The word 'show' means to 'signify' or to 'set forth in symbols'. May the Lord help us to interpret symbols! As Scotty Smith reminds us,

God is such an artist that He speaks on many different levels. There is poetry as well as narrative, prophecy as well as prose, parable, history, proverbs, song, didactic theology, past and so on, and onomatopoeia, assonance, simile, allegory, metaphor, alliteration, hyperbole and acrostics.

Of the 404 verses that constitute Revelation, 278 of them contain at least one allusion to an Old Testament passage. The picture of Christ in Revelation 1, for instance, matches that of Daniel's 'Ancient of Days'. We dare not miss this point. John's only code language is that of God's word. (Unveiled Hope. Scotty Smith and Michael Card. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997)

We can be so fixed on looking at things in one way only that we miss the reality of the event and of what God is saying. Rather than thinking that we need to be a very learned scholar to understand Revelation, just read it with an open heart. You may not have come across JB Phillip's little book *Your God is too small*, but the very title is enough to make us think. Revelation helps us to widen out our understanding. Revelation is a message from God at a time when the Church was facing not only the satanic attacks from Rome, but considerable immorality, worldliness and false teaching within it. As John Stott writes,

John's desire is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to stimulate our faithfulness in the present' (Men with a message Grand Rapids, 1994).

Revelation gives us confidence that that all the enemies of God will be overthrown. This means that we do not need to live paralysed with fear in a hostile world, no matter pressures we face. John's opening words reassure us, for they are directed 'to Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood' (1:5).

Jesus loves us, present tense, passionately, perfectly, completely

Scotty Smith.

Robert Weston, 10/1/2008