

Revelation



Awaiting the Bridegroom

by Susan Porterfield Currie



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May God bless you on your journey as you study throughout the year.

Debbie Schmidt
Chair 2010-11, NPWL

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Bridegroom*

By Susan Porterfield Currie

The Network of Presbyterian Women in Leadership

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*To the women of The Anchor Presbyterian Church, with
whom I first learned to wait, in love, for our Beloved to
be revealed in all his fullness. Come, Lord Jesus!*

Meet the Author



Susan Porterfield Currie ministers in the area of Spiritual Formation, offering spiritual formation teaching and spiritual direction to individuals and groups in the contexts of one-to-ones, small groups, retreats, and classes. Previously the Associate for Spiritual Formation at The Anchor Presbyterian Church in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, she now lives in Hamilton, Massachusetts, where she serves as the Associate for Spiritual Formation for the Pierce Center at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Additionally, she's the Program Coordinator and a member of the faculty of *Selah*, a certificate program in spiritual direction offered through Leadership Transformations Inc. Susan is married to Dave, the founding pastor of The Anchor Presbyterian Church and now Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell, and is graced with three children, Catherine (24), Roy (21), and Elspeth (17).

Meet the Graphic Designer

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Introduction

Wars, and rumors of wars. Famine, plague, earthquake, political and societal upheaval. These words describe not only our fearful expectation of the end times, but our real experience of the current times—and the real experience of the times in which the apostle John wrote what we’ve come to know as the Book of Revelation.

Hence we all too often look to this Biblical finale for clues as to what to expect: timelines, and geographies, reassurances that personally we’ll escape the worst of it. To read the book this way is to read it primarily for *information*, as if knowledge can help us keep control over what will happen.

Yet to look to Revelation expecting to find such details is to misread the book. It is, by nature, apocalyptic—the kind of literature we see in several of the Old Testament prophetic books, particularly Daniel and Ezekiel. Apocalyptic literature as a genre is largely symbolic and often bizarre in its details (numbers, dates, place references, beasts, etc.), rather than literal. This does not mean that apocalyptic literature isn’t true, but that it uses figurative language to describe the indescribable, keeping details of eternal mysteries shrouded from those whose hearts are darkened, and revealing truth to those with ears to hear (“apocalypse” is derived from the word “revelation”).

Hence at its heart the book of Revelation is not about revealing dates or names of nation states, but rather about revealing its author and his presence and ways with us, now and

in eternity. “The revelation of Jesus Christ,” the book begins, and ends with, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people. Amen.” The bridegroom, Jesus Christ, is writing a love letter to his bride, the Church, with the intention of encouraging us as we wait for his return. He acknowledges the difficult times we live in and that lie ahead, and he reassures us that indeed, the full outworking of justice against evil and the establishment of his kingdom reign is going on in the heavenly realms, soon to be seen on earth.

Jesus intends our waiting to be attentive—“Hear what the Spirit says to the churches!” is the refrain of chapters 2 and 3—faithful to Christ and obedient to his ways. This is a waiting that changes us and, as such, we read the book of Revelation not for *information* but for *formation*, letting it be a communication that shapes our developing relationship with Jesus, and at the same time shapes us ever more fully into the bride of Christ, awaiting the bridegroom.

In the weeks ahead, we’ll read our way through this amazing book as though getting an aerial view of this world from God’s perspective. We’ll skim over some passages (particularly those that would tempt us to get lost in symbolic detail) and land periodically for deeper exploration of others. Always we’re looking for the one who is being revealed, in blessing (Revelation 1:3), in grace and peace (1:4), the one “who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (1:5).

Open your Bibles, expecting to hear the words of Jesus. Open your hearts, expecting to receive his transforming love. He wants you to know his voice, to recognize his ways, and to respond to his Holy Spirit’s shaping, so that when he returns in all his glorious wedding raiment we, his bride, the Church, will be ready to greet him, and to receive him home.

My Beloved...



A Letter from the Beloved

Lord Jesus, open our minds and hearts to your truth, through the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God. Amen.

Way back when, before the days of email and cell phones and text messaging, I was courted by the man who eventually became my husband. We courted in person for a few years, and then he went away. He was called to be a pastor, and needed to go converse with “the experts” (seminary!, where I would join him a year later), leaving me behind while I finished what I was called to do right then—college studies.

So our courtship, in those final months, took place by letter. Once a week we treated ourselves to a phone call, precious (and expensive) minutes that too often were filled with silence as we longed towards the person at the other end of the line. But it was the letters that kept our hearts and our communication open. If we were writing today I suppose we’d use instant messaging (that’s a nice description of prayer!), or even a blog, which would allow for words as well as images and sound, a vibrant multi-sensory way of communicating that might be closer to the kind of vision that the apostle John tried to put into words in the book of Revelation. But a few decades ago we wrote letters.

Oh, what letters they were—lengthy pages that described not only the doings of our lives but the yearnings of our hearts. Perhaps our grandchildren will find them in a box in our attic one day, and read them





for what they were—love letters, whose details of everyday life served to communicate one deep truth: I miss you, my life here is deeply linked with your life there, and when I see you soon—what a celebration that will be!

This same deep longing and truth is conveyed to all of us in the multi-sensory vision given to John, and given to us as the book of Revelation. It is the communication that we, the Church, have received from our Beloved, Jesus Christ, and which we eagerly read, listening to his voice. Let's turn there now, to the book of Revelation.

Discuss:

Describe a letter you have received that was memorable and favorable!

If Jesus were to write a letter to you today, how do you think he might begin it? How would he address you? If he were reading it aloud, what might his tone be?

Read Revelation 1:1-3

Who initiates this communication? For what purpose?

Who receives the communication?

Where do we fit in this?

How are those who read it described? Why?

What does it mean to take something “to heart”?



Some translations begin, “The revelation from Jesus Christ...” and others begin, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” What are the nuances of each?

Explore the “what” of the revelation—what is being revealed (v 1; also v 7)?

Given that what will soon take place is the return of Jesus, discuss “who” is being revealed. Where is he now (see Hebrews 1:3, 10:12)? What might “near” mean (v 3)?

Read Revelation 1:19, “what is now and what will take place later”—how is part of this revelation not just about what’s to come but about the “now” of Jesus, how he’s relating to us in the present?

Read James 5:7-9


What two senses of the word “near” do these verses reveal?

- If we think of “near” as closeness in time—Jesus’ return soon—how are we to wait for it, according to these verses?
- If we think of “near” as closeness in space—Jesus present nearby—how do we look for Jesus to reveal himself now?

What does it mean to think of the fullness of the kingdom brushing up against us all the time, still hidden but very real, waiting for the curtain to be removed?

Read Revelation 1:4-8

How is Jesus described here? How are we described?
How is the relationship between us and Jesus described?



Note how the words “grace,” “peace,” and “love” (vv 4-5) describe God’s desire for us as we read the book of Revelation. How does this affect how you’ll read the upcoming chapters?

What happens if we misread this book—if we read it primarily as a warning, as “signs of the times to be analyzed correctly or else...”? What impact does this (mis)approach have on our relationship with God? How does it affect how we live each day?

In contrast, what happens if we read this book as a word of grace and encouragement, offered in love? What does it do to our relationship with God? How does it affect how we live each day?

Read Revelation 1:9-18

Usually Jesus is hidden from us, seated at the right hand of God (see Hebrews 1:3; 10:12, referenced on page 6). Here, in this vision to John, he is revealed. Describe him. What parallels to Matthew 17:1-8 do you see? In both accounts, what is the viewer's natural inclination upon seeing Jesus unveiled? What does Jesus do in response to his disciples' fear?

If you have extra time, you may want to look at Isaiah 6:1-8, and compare with these verses in Revelation 1 and Matthew 17.

From v 9, describe what it is like to be waiting for Jesus' return. What did "patient endurance" look like for John and the believers in the Roman Empire? What does it look like for us today?

Think broadly—in our daily living, at home and in the workplace/culture around us, in our shared congregational worship... What are we enduring? How do we do so with patience?



From v 10, when did John receive this vision?

The Lord's Day

The phrase “the Lord’s Day” was most likely a reference to Sunday, the day of Christ’s resurrection and hence the day of the week when the church gathered to worship the risen Lord. As non-Jews increasingly became part of the church, the Jewish sense of Sabbath (previously Saturday) was itself transferred to Sunday as well, making the day (as far as was legally doable in a pagan culture) one of both rest and celebration (worship).

How does refreshing rest heighten our awareness of God?

How does corporate worship heighten our awareness of God? What does it reveal about the reality of his kingdom and his rule? How does it strengthen us in our life with him, helping us to endure with patience?

What might it look like if we took a day each week that’s different from every other day—not just in our shared worship, but in what we do with the rest of the day?

In this first chapter of Revelation, John describes his encounter with the ascended Jesus. While most of us haven't had this kind of strong mystical experience, there are ways in which Jesus makes his presence known even to us! How have you experienced the presence of Jesus? How would you describe him? What are some things about him that, when you see them or hear them, help you to recognize him, saying, "Oh, this is Jesus!"?



Conclusion

The medievalists spoke of our ten senses: the five of our physical senses, and a corresponding five of our spiritual senses.

In this last book of the Bible, God “reveals” what is hidden from our physical senses. We can grow in our awareness of this hidden-yet-close reality by nurturing our spiritual senses—noticing what it’s like whenever God’s presence is being revealed: feelings of grace, peace, deep love, reassurance from fear, light, even conviction that is wrapped in the safety of love rather than abandonment...

In your patient enduring, learn to recognize the presence of God in Christ right alongside you, in the word of Scripture and in the presence of the Holy Spirit. Respond to the intimacy of this Triune presence with an unveiling of your own heart, open and responsive in love.

Group Prayer

* Lectio Divina: Revelation 1:4b-6

For Susan’s explanation of Lectio Divina, please see page 111.

*O Lord, give
this love into
my soul, that I
may never
more live nor
breathe but out
of a most pure
love of Thee,
my All and
only Good. Let
me love Thee
for Thyself,
and nothing
else but in and
for Thee. Let
me love nothing
instead of Thee,
for to give all
for love is a
most sweet
bargain...*

*Dame
Gertrude More*

Take Home

Reflection

- Fine-tune your spiritual senses in the days ahead. Ask God to reveal the hidden world all around you, the Kingdom of God—and notice whenever you catch a sense of this world. It might be a word or phrase that stands out in reading the Bible. It might be something of stark sudden beauty that your eyes behold, or your ears catch. It might be a light scent, wafting past, or the solid realness of something you touch. Notice whatever God lightly draws your attention to, and stay present to God with it as long as you can.
- At the end of each day, prayerfully think back over your day. Note any occasions when your spiritual senses picked up on God’s presence. You might recognize these by asking yourself: “When today did I feel grace? Peace? Love? How might those have been God, very close?”
- Come to the next lesson ready to share a God-sensing with the rest of the group.

Prayer

Each day, pray Revelation 1:12-18 in the slow, reflective, listening way with which we closed our first meeting. Don’t try to make anything happen in this prayer, just sit with this image of Jesus, noticing who he is, and what it’s like to be in his presence.

You may want to look at artwork of the Transfiguration while you sit with this image; for example, see Christianity Today’s webpage with artwork of the Transfiguration, particularly: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/special/transfiguration/2.2.html