

NPWL 2010-2011 Bible Study  
*Revelation: Awaiting the Bridegroom*

A study of the book of Revelation by Susan Porterfield-Currie

Leader's Guide

LESSON 1 – *A Letter From the Beloved*

- 1) Keep this moving, and brief (5 minutes total).
- 2) Avoid discussions of the full content of the letter—try to keep bringing the question back to, “How would he begin it?” You may want to ask how they begin letters to people they love, no matter what the following content will be.
- 3) Help clarify this by breaking down each phrase—God gives Jesus a revelation, which Jesus expresses here, so that his servants will know what will soon take place (all v 1). Explain that “revelation” means “unveiling” or “disclosure,” so God’s intent is to make something that’s hidden become seeable, and known.
- 4) Note that John receives the communication (in the form of a vision) from the angel, and writes it down so that others may read it. Especially linger with the phrase, “take it to heart.” God does not primarily want us to groove on head stuff in Revelation. He wants it to affect our hearts in such a way that it changes how we live.
- 5) Note that “the revelation *of* (NIV)/ *from* (TNIV) Jesus Christ” can mean either “the revelation by or from Jesus Christ,” or “the revelation about Jesus Christ,” or both. While the first meaning is primary, the second is valid, particularly when taken in the context of the entire letter. Draw both meanings out in the discussion.  
\* The questions about “near” and “now” are intended to get the group thinking about Jesus not just as an historical figure (as clearly portrayed in the Gospels) or as one yet to return and relate to us in the future but as someone who’s somehow present with us and relating to us now, just as he somehow did to John decades after the Ascension. While physically Jesus is at the Father’s right hand, through his Holy Spirit he is at the same time close—see John 14:17-21. It’s okay for this to feel hard to pin down; it’s one of the mysteries of faith that’s partially revealed here! (Colossians 1:27)
- 6) Note: The NIV Study Bible has the following footnote for James 5:7-9:  
*“A reference to Christ’s second coming... and the judgment associated with it. The NT insistence on immanence (e.g., in Romans 13:12, Hebrews 10:25, 1 Peter 4:7, Revelation 22:20) arises from the teaching that the ‘last days’ began with the incarnation. We have been living in the ‘last days’ [James 5:3] ever since.... The next great event in redemption history is Christ’s second coming. The NT does not*

*say when it will take place, but its certainty is never questioned and believers are consistently admonished to watch for it.”*

*ENDNOTE: Barker, Kenneth, General Editor. The NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985. Footnotes on James contributed by Donald W. Burdick.*

Mention that all through our study we'll be looking through this lens, trying to see the “now” and the “near” of Jesus and his kingdom, how this hidden reality is very, very close and, as we are formed in him, our spiritual senses will become more alert to the true Reality all around us.

7) Beginning with verse 4, and going through the rest of the book of Revelation, readers will notice details such as “seven spirits” (1:4; 4:5), “a sea of glass” (4:6), creatures both awesome and hideous, stars and blood and earthquakes and fire, various numbers and combinations of numbers, etc... Tens of thousands of pages have been written in efforts to decipher these details. Try to keep your study group from making this the focus of their attention! If someone persistently wants to know the meaning of such details, refer them to a good commentary (such as the one mentioned in the bibliography). Each time this comes up, try to refocus the conversation by saying, “This is how apocalyptic literature works—the details are here not to be figured out but to create an impression.” Then return them to the question at hand.

8) Drive home this point—for those who love God, who are God’s servants, the book of Revelation is meant to be a loving word of grace and peace, not fear. To read it in any other way is to ignore the tone in God’s voice! You may want to refer the group back to the study’s *Introduction*, which elaborates on the distinction between reading the book for *information* (mastering the content of what will happen) and reading it for *formation* (letting it shape our love relationship with God).

9) Note that the author of the book of Revelation is most likely the same John described in Matthew 17. Given that, help the group imagine how John would have felt at seeing this vision in Revelation 1:16, and at hearing Jesus’ words in verse 17.

If you have extra time and you look at Isaiah 6:1-8, note the similarities—the viewer catches a glimpse of the Lord in all his glory, and responds in holy fear. The Lord then reaches out to the viewer in cleansing/reassurance. Talk about our responses to the Lord’s presence: do we feel or express holy fear? How does the Lord make us worthy to be there, and reassure us of our worthiness?

10) Note that John was likely on Patmos as a punishment, probably having been exiled there by the Roman authorities. (Patmos is a small island off the coast of modern Turkey, and was a Roman penal colony in John’s day.) The believers back in the thick of things on the continent themselves faced increasing persecution for their faith, for around this time the Roman authorities were beginning to enforce public worship of the Emperor. All alike were wondering, “How long, O Lord?” as they waited for Jesus’ promised return.

In our North American culture we don't face as much direct persecution as do believers in other parts of the world or at other times in history. Yet, if we live faithfully and obediently, there will be things we have to "endure." Explore what these might be, and what patient waiting for Jesus looks like in those areas.

You may want to discuss Advent as a time in the church year when we practice waiting with patient endurance for the Lord's coming, and explore what it would look like to go through Advent as a time of expectant waiting rather than an early celebration—how would it help shape our real-life waiting for Jesus' return?

11) This concept of "the Lord's Day," or Sabbath, may be completely new to some in the group. Others may have a restrictive view of it, depending on how Sabbath was observed in their growing up years. For the purposes of this question, make the point that this is a day that's set apart from what normally occurs, a day to rest in God and rejoice in your life with him. Observing Sabbath will certainly help you be more attentive to the Lord's presence, as John is here! If people are interested, you may reference three excellent books on Sabbath:

\* Baab, Lynne M. *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005.

\* Buchanan, Mark. *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*. Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, Thomas Nelson, Inc, 2006.

\* Dawn, Marva J. *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*. Grand Rapids, MI: WB Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989.

12) Help the group think beyond concretes here. You may need to give a personal example—a time in prayer when you sensed Jesus' presence, what it feels like to know he's directing you, etc.

Prayer)

As you introduce the group to how to do this, after reading the first paragraph about "lectio divina," you may want to give an example (or you can try without and, if the group struggles, give the example the next time at the end of session 2). Example:

"The first reading will be noticing at the mind level, the second reading at the heart level, and the third reading at the level of 'how does what I've been noticing form a prayer that God is giving me to pray?'

"For instance, let's say we were doing this with Psalm 23. During the first reading, the phrase 'still waters' really resonates for you. So you stay with it, and during the second reading you notice that it's making you feel very calm, at peace. You continue to stay with it, letting God speak through it, and after the third reading you realize that God is inviting you to pray something like 'Lord, this is the kind of peace you want to give me right now. Help me to trust you with it.'"

Reading 1: Instruct the group to listen to the scripture as you read it, and to notice whatever draws their attention: a word, a phrase, an image, a thought that flits across their mind... and to stay with that, letting it marinate in their awareness.

\*Read the text very slowly, letting the words resonate and sink in

\*Invite the group to speak back out loud, whatever word or phrase or image or thought he has drawn their attention to (short sharing, not elaborating, just speaking the word or phrase or image)

Reading 2: Invite the group to listen to the text again, this time noticing how they're feeling as God's word sinks down into their heart.

\* Read the text, slowly

\* Invite the group to speak back, out loud, what it is that they're noticing at the heart/feeling level (again, short, just speaking what they notice)

Reading 3: Invite the group to listen to the text one last time, this time noticing how whatever it is that God has been drawing their attention to, in thought and in feeling and in prayerful conversation, might shape a specific prayer that God is inviting them to pray.

\* Read the text, slowly

\* Invite the group to pray back to God, out loud, whatever prayer he has been giving them through what they've been noticing

Close with your own spoken summary prayer, offering back to God all that has been going on in this shared prayerful conversation.

## LESSON 2 – *Known by the Beloved*

1) This particular sharing question is very important. Depending on the level of trust in your group, it may take 5 minutes or it may take 15. Keep it personal and practical, not people saying what they *think about* God but rather *how they're experiencing* him. Questions such as “What did God seem like in that experience?” or “What was going on between you and God in that?” can help.

2) Use this point to encourage the group to try to listen to the Holy Spirit as they listen to each other. All listening should be two directional: listening to the other person (exterior listening) and listening to what the Holy Spirit is doing with that inside us (interior listening). It's appropriate to pray when entering any conversation or group study, “Holy Spirit, keep me listening to you.”

3) When part of a verse is referred to, just read that part. For instance, 2:1a would be just the phrase “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write...” and 2:23b would be “Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds...”

4) The particular self-identifying phrases that Jesus uses in chapters 2 and 3 reflect various aspects of how he was described in 1:12-20. They illustrate that Jesus is not a one-dimensional figure, but a living, complex one. He relates to us in different ways at different times according to what's going on in our lives and how he wants to be encountering us.

5) Give people a few minutes of silent reflection to jot down their sentences describing Jesus. Then ask them to speak them out, compiling them into a list. (Using newsprint or a blackboard can be a helpful visual, putting clearly in front of the group the multi-faceted ways of Jesus' presence in their lives.)

6) Particularly note that no church is perfect. For every strength commended, there's a sin tendency at work in their midst as well. Much of what's called “church hopping” today – the practice of moving from church to church, always finding something to be dissatisfied about in your current church so moving on to the next one – is justified by the excuse that something in a church disappointed the church-hopper. This short-circuits our growth, keeping us from ever putting down roots in a place where our sin edges will help each other grow in sanctification.

7) Emphasize the “gracious and humble” instructions! If need be, continue to remind the group of this, and suggest they rephrase any critical sentences so that they begin with “I think Jesus would say ‘I encourage you to...’”

8) The phrase that's repeated is “To those who are victorious...” (TNIV; NIV says “To him who overcomes...”) Talk about what we're encouraged to overcome or to be victorious in (struggle with sin, external and internal, in the culture around us and in the church).

Note that this phrase also describes Jesus, who overcame the world (see John 16:33), along with death.

9) In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed Frank Gaebelin), Alan Johnson notes the parallels between the promises here and the eschatological reality described in chapters 21 and 22. He also notes that these promises contain echoes of Genesis 2-3, and writes: "What was lost originally by Adam in Eden is more than regained in Christ. The expression 'I will give' or 'I will make' identifies Christ as the absolute source and donor of every gift. Probably we are to understand the multiple promises as different facets that combine to make up one great promise to believers, that wherever Christ is, there will the overcomers be." (p 432)

10) Try to help the group see that life this side of Jesus' return is indeed a struggle, but when we let it be a struggle together *with* Jesus, it becomes about who we are becoming – how we are growing into who we'll be for eternity. Even the struggle, then, is a place of Jesus' love. (If you're pressed for time, keep the discussion with the question and don't try to look at the suggested additional passage; if you have extra time, do read 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, which beautifully illustrates this principle.)

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

### LESSON 3 – *Knowing the Beloved: The Priestly King*

1) With this question we're trying to create an expectation that the better we get to know Jesus – the more time we spend with him, the more contexts we see him in – the richer and fuller our image of him will be. Note that while the scriptures give us the most reliable picture of Jesus, and all other experiences of him need to be held up to, and confirmed by, what we know of him in the Gospels and in the other New Testament writings about him (i.e. Romans 5-6; Colossians 1; Hebrews; here in Revelation, etc), because Jesus is living and with us through his Holy Spirit, we will have experiences of communion with him, and these experiences can enrich our understanding of him.

2) This question builds off of question 1 above, and is intended to encourage sharing from people's prayerful reflection since the last study. Let people linger with it; encourage their vulnerability in sharing. This is holy ground. You may even want to transition between this and the formal text reading/study of the next question by briefly praying, holding up to God what has been shared.

3) Help the group flesh out the truth that the best thing to do, if we want to understand something, is to look at God. One commentary reads, "The prophet ascends 'in the Spirit' to see the source of all that will happen on earth (please see Revelation 1:1). It will all be an expression of the throne's purpose; nothing happens, nothing exists in the past, present, or future apart from God's intention." (Alan F. Johnson, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.)

4) Hopefully people will receive an impression of great beauty, and a response of awe. As people share, help them see that this response is the heart of worship, and builds on what we saw in chapter 1:17 (when we also referenced the Transfiguration in Matthew 17 and Isaiah before the throne of God in Isaiah 6).

5) Again, remind people that this is the nature of apocalyptic literature – it is highly symbolic, with each symbol often having multiple layers of meaning.

The 24 elders: Therefore it's not inconsistent for the 24 elders to be some kind of angelic order that also represents the full community of the people of God (12 Old Testament tribes and 12 New Testament apostles). Similarly, the 4 living creatures can simultaneously represent all order of animate beings as well as the fullness of life and power in God's nature (you may want to note that this image references Isaiah 6:2-3 and Ezekiel 1:5-28, 10:1-22).

The 4 living creatures: The creatures serve as agents of God/the Lamb (see Revelation 5:6, 6:1-8) in mediating judgment on the world: "Their knowing eyes search the earth, and they execute punishments only on those who truly deserve them. For the discerning reader these 'living beings' are an encouragement to keep persevering under persecution, knowing that God is acutely aware of their plight and is already in the process of taking action in their favor and against their persecutors (as chapters 6 and

on reveal)." (Beale, p 330) Resist minimizing these verses to a literal identification (i.e. "It must be the 12 sons of Israel, which one is Reuben?" or "It's 4 creatures, this must be the 4 Gospel writers!") and instead note the impression it creates – the point here is that God is at the center of this amazing collection of awesome creatures, and all are worshipping him!

6) \* Genesis 49:10 is part of a prophetic utterance of the patriarch Jacob, when he blessed his sons; this particular blessing is of Judah, and was initially fulfilled in Judah's descendant David, and ultimately in his descendant Christ.

\* Isaiah 11:1,10 blanket the verses we often read during Advent, another prophecy of the Messiah. In verse 10 note the language of "peoples" and "nations", which appears in Revelation 5:9; Jesus' kingship is not merely over one people group but over all.

\* Jeremiah 23:5-6 – note the word "safety," and from Isaiah 11:10 "place of rest." As a way of helping the group be specific in answering the question about the expectations of the Messiah, ask them to note descriptive phrases in these passages, listing adjectives and verbs that describe Jesus' reign. Let this build a sense of the absolute rightness of the eternal life awaiting us, and of our joyful longing for it rather than fear of it.

7) These verses build a picture of the sacrificial lamb. Depending on your available time, you may want to plan ahead of time which verses you'll get to if you can't get to them all. Or you may want to have different people look up different verses, read them, and then summarize them as a whole group.

\* The Exodus passage describes the Passover, which faithful Jews observe to this day, and which prefigures our own passing from sin and death to life, because of the blood of Jesus.

\* The Isaiah verses prophesy Jesus' death as a "lamb" (v 7) whose sacrificial death for our sins (vv 5-6) restored us to a relationship of wholeness from sin and hence peace with God (v5).

\* John 1:29, 35-36 show John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin - who was raised on the scriptures and in the priestly tradition of the symbolism of sacrifice for sin – identifying Jesus as the "lamb of God."

\* Acts 8:30-35 shows a divinely appointed meeting between the apostle Philip and someone from Ethiopia (beginning to fulfill the prophecy that representatives from all nations would gather around the throne!) in which the Ethiopian is reading the Isaiah verses we just looked at, and Philip interprets them as being about Jesus. This is a wonderful example of how we can use the scriptures to invite people to faith in Jesus.

\* 1 Peter 1:17-21 has Peter, too, using language of Jesus as the "lamb" of God whose blood redeemed us from an empty way of life to a life of faith and hope in God.

8) Let the group figure out the progression for themselves; if they struggle, or to summarize, you may read the following quote from Alan Johnson's commentary on "Revelation" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (p 464): "In these two chapters, the sequence of hymns shows that the first two are addressed to God, the next two to the Lamb, and the last one to both. There is also a gradual enlargement in the size of the choirs. The internal movement also builds as the last hymn is sung by 'every creature in

heaven and on earth and under the earth' to 'him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb' (5:13)."

9) The Trinity with each other:

\* 4:2 (the Holy Spirit leads us into the presence of the throne)

\* 4:2-5 (the Father is on the throne)

\* 5:6 (the Lamb, Jesus, is before the throne)

The Trinity is present here at the center together, Jesus carrying out the full kingdom will of the Father, the Spirit inviting us into it.

The Trinity with us:

\* 4:11 (it is through the will of the Father that we were created)

\* 5:9-10 (it is through the sacrifice of Jesus that God's purposes for us are fulfilled: we are brought into God's kingdom and are restored to our role as reigning priests and servants)

\* 4:1-2 (it is through the Spirit that we are shown the kingdom in its full reality, and that we are able to see Jesus, to hear his voice, and to know the Father)

10) These verses identify us as priests and as rulers (just as Jesus is the priest, coming between us and God with a sacrificial offering, and he is the king, ruling on the throne).

\* Verse 8, we pray, and our prayers are an offering to God – this is a priestly function. If you have time, discuss what biblical priests do, and how it models our praying role. (They offer sacrifices of worship, honoring God as holy – our prayers of adoration which are indeed a fragrant offering, like incense; and sacrifices of atonement, coming between a sinful people and a holy God to seek forgiveness on behalf of the people – our prayers of intercession.)

\* Verses 9-10, we "reign" on earth – this is a ruling function. The image here, going back to Genesis 1:26, is of our being sub-rulers under God, the localized representatives of the ruling King on his throne. This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God, and to be restored to that image in Christ.

Prayer) See notes at end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

## LESSON 4 – *Knowing the Beloved: The Warrior and Judge*

- 1) If the question itself seems confusing, turn back to the Take Home section of the last lesson, the first Reflection question, to see what it's all about. Noticing moments of sensing God's pleasure may be new to many people, and difficult for rational types! Try phrasing it in terms of "When did you feel a sense of 'Ah! How lovely!'" or "When I do this it feels so right!" or "Oh, this is who I'm meant to be!"
- 2) Don't spend too much time on this question – just a few quick answers, intended to lead us into the study itself.
- 3) It's important for the group to share a sense of the overwhelming ungodliness of the world, necessitating God's judgment; hence these verses. However, we're not used to strong language like this in our culture or in many of our churches, and it may make people uncomfortable (and make others sound judgmental). Keep the tone humble, full of grace, being careful to note not only references to sexual sins but to sins of greed, gossip, etc, drawing the group into an awareness of their own complicity in the sin of the world. Try to keep the discussion from derailing into tirades against specific sins, or debates about specific sins. If the discussion becomes problematic, offer to stay after with any who are bothered by specific verses or specific conversation points; be willing to meet together with your pastor to further work through this.
- 4) If it comes up, note that the casting down of Satan from heaven referred to in 12:9 is a reference to his final casting out of heaven at Christ's death and resurrection – vv 10-11. At this, the devil's power over believers is greatly lessened, as he has lost his earlier place at God's side from whence he accused God's people. In fury he will pick up the intensity of his attacks until the end, but these verses assure us of Christ's victory over him, and of Christ's protection of us. (We'll look at Christ's final judgment against the evil one in lesson 6.)

Notice that the Lord not only protects us from the attacks of the evil one, but he restores us to our created role as rulers with him – seen here in Zechariah 3:7 when the high priest Joshua is given charge of God's courts, and in Luke 22:32 when Peter is given the role of strengthening the other disciples.

(If someone, glancing at the surrounding verses, wonders who "the woman" is earlier in chapter 12, explain that she symbolizes the believing community of faith, both before and after Christ's birth. While some scholars, particularly Roman Catholic ones, have identified her with Mary, this can't be a literal Mary, for the chapter goes on to refer to Satan's persecution of her (v 13), and to "the rest of her offspring – those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus." (v 17) If no one notices or asks, there's no need to take time with this.)

### **Read Revelation 6:7-8; 8:7,9,11**

5) These verses describe death through war, famine, plague, and natural disaster. While all of these are aspects of what's going on during God's final judgment on the world, they aren't themselves direct judgment against specific people or specific sins; they are part of the resulting battle between the powers of the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light, as the great cosmic battle plays itself out on earth. We are pawns of wrong theology when we attribute natural disaster, illness, etc to God's "judgment" against sin. God desires to keep us safe "through this time of trial," as one translation of the Lord's Prayer puts it, until his judgment against sin and its effects has been completed. Note too, here and in the following questions (especially question 11), that all of creation has been affected by sin – and God's judgment is also an act of mercy, freeing all of creation from its bondage to sin.

6) These verses can be confusing. The following comments may help your group focus on the relevant aspects of each comparison.

\* Genesis 3:1, 4, 13 and Revelation 12:9 – Revelation describes Satan as the one who accuses, and leads the world astray; in the Genesis verses we see him leading Eve astray by misrepresenting God's words.

\* Genesis 3:14-15 and Revelation 12:4-5, 10-11, 17 – The Genesis verses describe conflict between Satan and the woman/her offspring; in Revelation we see this played out.

\* Genesis 3:17-19 and Revelation 8:7, 9, 11 – Nature itself was affected by the Fall, as a result of Satan's attacks in Genesis 3, and will continue to be affected through the ongoing cosmic battle.

Note how these verses themselves illustrate the multi-layered, often simultaneously enacting, chronology of Revelation: what's described can be references to past history, current realities, and future events – "the already and not yet" of the kingdom of God.

7) Had Adam and Eve, and eventually their offspring, eaten from the tree of life, they/we would have lived forever in a state of sin and a world of sin. Death is both a natural judgment against sin and a merciful deliverance from an eternity of sin. Through his death and resurrection, Christ overcame death and opened the way for us into new life, and we regained eternity – but without the pollution of sin.

Hints of hope in Genesis 3:

\* 3:9, in spite of our sin, God still seeks us out

\* 3:15, the offspring of the woman, despite being bruised by the serpent, will have the victory and crush him

\* 3:21, God still cares for us, here providing covering (covering shame, as well as from the elements as creation becomes harsh and Adam and Eve must leave the garden)

\* 3:24 the tree of life is still there, waiting for us to be allowed to eat from it! (We'll look at this in more depth in a later lesson.)

8) For elaboration on the word "saints," see Romans 1:5-7. The NIV Study Bible footnote for these verses says, "The basic idea of the Greek for this word is 'holiness.' All Christians are saints in that they are positionally 'set apart' to God and are experientially

being made increasingly 'holy' by the Holy Spirit." As God's set apart people, we are called to reign with him, part of which we exercise through prayer for the world.

9) The NIV Study Bible describes "the mystery of God" as the truth that "God has won the victory over the forces of evil and will reign for ever and ever." Thus part of the mystery is how the suffering of the saints will be redeemed as part of God's plan; again, these verses are meant to encourage God's people.

10) Note verse 18a: "the nations were angry [Greek "wrathful"], and your wrath has come;" and 18d: "for destroying those who destroy the earth." God's justice is not arbitrary, but always fits the crime.

11) The Greek here translated "destroying/ destroy" means "spoiling, corrupting." Genesis 1:26, 28, 2:15 charged us, as co-rulers made in God's image, to rule over the creation in ways that sustain and nurture its goodness. It is this very corruption of our identity and calling that comes under judgment, in contrast to the rewards of those who "revere God's name" (v 18). All that was affected by the Fall – our souls and bodies, relationships and society, and nature itself – has significance in the final judgment and, by implication, in the full kingdom reign of Christ (we'll see more of this in our closing lessons).

12) The authority is that of the Lord God, ruling from his throne (vv 15-17). The Ark of the Covenant is an Old Testament symbol of God's presence with his people. It was built by Moses during the wilderness sojourn to hold the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Once the Israelites settled in the land and built their Temple, the ark was kept in the inner most room, the "Holy of Holies," separated from the rest of the temple and hence from the people by a curtain. Significantly, in this image in Revelation 11:19 the curtain that separated the ark in the Holy of Holies (the place of God's residing) from the rest of the temple and of the people is now gone; sin that has necessitated separation from God has been dealt with through the atoning work of Christ; God's covenant promise to abide with his people always is now fulfilled. (You may want to reference Mark 15:37-38, describing how, upon Jesus' death, the curtain in the Temple that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn from top to bottom. At Jesus' death on the cross sin lost its power, and we need no longer be separated from the Holy God.)

Alan Johnson, in his commentary on Revelation in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (p 510) writes: "This sight of the ark of the covenant also prepares us for the following chapters, which concern the faithfulness of God to his covenant people. As the ark of the covenant was the sign to Israel of God's loyal love throughout their wilderness journeys and battles, so this sign of the new covenant will assure the followers of Christ of his loyal love through their severe trial and the attack by the beast."

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

## LESSON 5 – *Knowing the Beloved: The Shepherd King*

1) If people have been hesitant to share during this time in previous weeks, try putting them in groups of 2-3, and sharing within their smaller groups. The goal of the At Home prayer times has been to get them noticing God's presence and stirrings in their daily life, and these sharing questions give them a chance to explore that together.

2) As with other Discuss questions in the study, this is a time to invite people into the images and themes of the particular lesson – not to come up with right answers. Allow people to share what “shepherd” has meant to them, regardless of its positive or negative or neutral connotations. Being able to get out on the table whatever they're bringing with them will make them more open to the biblical images we'll examine in the questions following.

3) These verses are yet another depiction of those gathered around the throne of God, “the faithful who have lived throughout the ages” (G.K. Beale, “Revelation” in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, p 443). See also Revelation 5:9. Help the group distinguish that only Jesus is the Lamb who was slain for all – thus only Jesus is “the Way” to a restored life with God (God's exclusive love, only accessed through Jesus) – and yet God's desire is that this Jesus Way be open to all cultures and ethnicities (God's inclusive love, inclusive of all cultures).

4) Explore this from a variety of angles – experiences of physical desert (illness), emotional desert (depression, boredom), relational desert (divorce, loneliness, loss of a loved one), vocational desert (loss of job, not sure of calling), spiritual desert (feeling distant from God).

5) The verses referred to in this question are ones that capture the basic sense of God sheltering his people, and the kind of care that involves. Let people linger over the images of being cared for by the Good Shepherd – of what it means to be welcomed into and offered hospitality in his dwelling place. You may want to note that Middle Eastern hospitality (often offered in tents!) is completely different from American hospitality. In the Middle East, as in many other parts of the world, the guest is honored, and given the best of care, not kept standing on the front lawn while we talk to them from the safety of the front porch!

6) Have the group look up John 1:14 as part of their discussion of this question. Read it in different translations. Note Eugene Peterson's translation in *The Message*:

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.  
We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son,  
Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

7) This is a good place to talk about some of the mission ministries you support – individual missionaries, and groups to whom they minister. Prepare for this question by bringing in some information about the missions your church supports.

8) The “shepherd” of verse 17 is also described as “the Lamb” and as being “at the center before the throne.” Thus he cares for those under his care; he offers himself as a sacrifice for us; and he rules as king. Note that it was common in the ancient world for kings to refer to themselves as shepherds of their people.

In discussing the balance of these three images in our experience, our personal stories, and our worship: Try to draw out examples of how, for instance, we may talk a lot about how Jesus saved us from sin, but have a shallow understanding of how he rules our lives; or we may rely on him to take care of us in a shepherding way, but not be comfortable with his dealing with our sin.

9) There are rich images in all three passages! All three clearly speak of the Shepherd caring for us. Additionally:

- Psalm 23 shows him saving us (v 4 - through the valley of the shadow of death; v 5 - in the presence of my enemies) and ruling us (v 3 - guiding us along right paths for his name’s sake; v 5 - anointing us).
- John 10:1-16 shows him saving us (v 9 - “shall be saved;” vv 11, 15, 17-18 - he lays down his life for the sheep) and indirectly, ruling us (v 18 - he has authority).
- 1 Peter 2:24-25 shows him saving us (v 24 - reference to the Cross) and ruling us (v 25 - the “Overseer” of our souls).

The question about how we’re relating back to Jesus takes some sitting with each passage. Sometimes the answers are obvious, sometimes they take some imagination by putting ourselves in the passage. Encourage the group to notice:

- Psalm 23 – We receive his care and guiding (vv 1-3); we trust him (v 4); vv 5-7, given that we’re dwelling with him and not just visiting, imply reciprocal relating in love, sitting at table together, etc.
- John 10:1-16 – We listen to him (v 3; v 4 - we know his voice, so we’ve spent time becoming familiar with it!); we follow him (vv 3-4); we go in and out with him – living with him through the time and spaces of our day (v 9).
- 1 Peter 2:24-25 – We stay with him, not straying off on our own, but living into righteousness as we let him rule us.

10) Don’t get caught up in symbolic detail. Instead, keep this question focused by asking “What kind of suffering is mentioned here?” and “How are we to go through it,” or “How is God sustaining us through it?” The main point in these verses is that God takes care of his people, even right in the midst of the valley of the shadow.

- Revelation 13:5-7, 10b; 14:12 – In his commentary on Revelation in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Alan Johnson notes that the beast’s enemies are the saints, whom he sets out to destroy. “But little does he realize that in the death of the saints the triumph of God appears. As they die, they do so in identification with the slain Lamb who through the Cross has decisively conquered the dragon by inflicting on him a truly fatal wound” (p 527). We go through the valley of the shadow of death *with* Jesus, identifying with him in his suffering and in his victory.

- Revelation 16:5-6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:1-2 – All through history some of God’s people have been killed for their faithfulness to the Lord. These verses reassure us that God has seen, and will bring justice on our behalf. Remind the group of our core text for this study, Revelation 7:15-17; after our suffering in the desert, God will wipe away our tears and refresh us with his care (images of Psalm 23:5-6 and the ways in which, after passing through the valley, the Shepherd spreads a table for his people).
- Revelation 17:14 – We are with the Lamb, Jesus, in his overcoming of those who have made war against him.

11) Remind the group of the point made in Lesson 1, that there’s a “near” now-ness to the kingdom, a lived reality just on the other side of the curtain that, as we grow, we get more glimpses of. Thus, if done in a worshipful heart, as an act of worship, we can be serving God in whatever we do on earth; our acts of service are offerings we are bringing to his throne. Challenge the group to try to be aware always of being in the presence of God, to think of being right at his throne while we’re in the midst of everything else here. How would that change how we live each moment?

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

## LESSON 6 – *Awaiting the Beloved: Preparing for the Wedding*

1) As the group continues to grow in depth of sharing, answering this kind of a question could take up a long time! If you notice the sharing getting so long that you're not getting to finish the study in your allotted time, consider having people divide into groups of 2-3 to share their answers to this question.

2) "What went on, around you and in you?" We're quick to talk about how we filled the time during our waiting, what we did, etc. Make sure the group also talks about what was happening inside them – perhaps impatience, despair, boredom, forgetfulness of what they're waiting for, or a growing anticipation...

3) Try not to get into discussions about the timeframe involved here. Scholars have differed on this for centuries. Gently remind people that we're not trying to sort out timeframes but to note Christ's person and actions. Here, his actions are to ultimately and finally defeat the powers and their effects that have set themselves up against his kingdom – Satan, his followers, and death and hell. By casting them into the lake of fire, they are defeated "for ever and ever" (v 20).

Depending on your group, you may want to also reference 20:13-15, and 21:8, which describe God's judgment against those people who have lived in rebellion to him and his ways – they, too, will be thrown into this lake of fire. This is a biblical teaching, and worth noting, but in our culture it is often used insensitively (as if God doesn't care about people) or in misleading ways (to characterize Christians as judgmental). Use your discretion as to how disturbing this will be to the group, and whether you need pastoral support in teaching this/dealing with the concerns it raises.

(It is interesting to note that, in Revelation 22:14-15, some evildoers appear to still be around. However, both Alan Johnson in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* and G.K. Beale in *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* note that the emphasis in Revelation 22:15 is that these evildoers are *outside* the city, i.e. not present in the city – because they've been thrown into the lake of fire (20:15). Beale notes "That these reprobate are 'outside' the 'city' indicates that they will have no place in the new creation, since the new creation and the city are probably synonymous concepts. This 'outside' location is 'the lake of fire,' ... The punishment of being cast outside the garden, which began in Genesis 3:23-24, continues for the reprobate into eternity, on an escalated scale" (p 1142).)

4) "First" subquestion: Compare with Old Testament prophecies such as Ezekiel 27 and 28, on which much of this Revelation passage is modeled. For the sake of time, just look at Ezekiel 28:15-18a, as examples of what was wrong with the basis of this economy.

"Second" subquestion: Mention that later in our studies we'll see that there is a legitimate place for beauty, jewels, wealth, feasting, and music in the full kingdom of

God. What's under judgment here is the idolatrous/adulterous use of these – they, and not God, have become the objects of our devotion.

5) You may want to note that, throughout history, the Church has interpreted this in different ways. There have been extremist interpretations leading to geographical separation into Christian communes. There are the more moderate examples of groups such as the Amish who choose to have their own ways of dressing and handling things like insurance, but who still bank with the culture's banks and shop at the culture's grocery stores. There are aspects to this that some of us in this group may be living into ourselves, for instance, if we have our children enrolled in Christian schools, or if we choose to invest only in companies that are intentionally run with an ethos of Christian principles and justice. We will differ in how we apply this verse; the challenge to us all is to take it seriously, understanding the biblical invitation of verse 4 to not share in the world's sins, and prayerfully listening to the Holy Spirit's application of it to our individual life and to our church's life.

6) Try to keep people from the sacred/secular split – the idea that some things we do are holy (i.e. prayer) and other things are not (i.e. cleaning the house). With this mindset, we'd all have to live a monastic life in order to truly "avoid" the world. Unfortunately, as Jesus himself notes, it's not the externals that pollute us, it's the internals! (Matthew 15:17-20) Obviously we should avoid certain worldly engagements that are in and of themselves evil but, aside from those, what we want to explore in this question is how we live in ways that support our love relationship with God right in the midst of our daily living, not in contrast to it.

7) Note that both descriptions mention "fine linen" – in and of itself, the beautiful adornment of the city given to the world's ways (chapter 18) isn't evil. The adornment of the city representing God's bride (see 21:3) includes some of the same raiment. The differences lie in *how each adornment was acquired* - for Babylon, it was through wickedness (see question 4); for the bride of Christ, it's through righteousness (19:8); as well as in *how each is used* – for Babylon, in idolatry and unjust self-indulgent excesses (18:3) and for the bride of Christ, in worship (preparing to give ourselves to the bridegroom).

8) "Works righteousness" is the theology that says we make ourselves acceptable to God through doing good deeds. Reformed theology – indeed, biblical theology! – has always rejected this notion. Ephesians 2:8-10 makes clear that we're not saved *by* doing good works. Rather, we're saved *for* good works – out of thankfulness to God, and our ever-increasing becoming like Jesus, we will be growing into a life of serving God through good (righteous) acts. Such righteous acts both fulfill our calling to steward the earth, and somehow help us become ready to meet Jesus (this is part of what sanctification is all about – making us ready to meet Jesus).

9) Historically (right up until the past century) it was a Middle Eastern custom for the host of a wedding to provide his guests with appropriate wedding clothing. This is

particularly important for guests like those in this parable who are brought in from the streets. The footnote for the NIV Study Bible notes, “The failure of the man in question to avail himself of a wedding garment was therefore an insult to the host, who had made the garments available,” and adds, “The wedding garment no doubt speaks of the righteousness that God, the gracious host, provides for all who accept his invitation. God issues an undeserved invitation to undeserving people, and in addition provides the righteousness the invitation demands.”

Note that saving righteousness comes from God (the parable, and Ephesians 2:6-10), and somehow characterizes us as we “make ourselves ready” (Revelation 19:7) by accepting it/donning it.

10) Talk some about how we “care for” our salvation: how do we nurture our saving relationship with Christ?

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

## LESSON 7 – *The Beloved Comes Home*

These final three lessons will challenge most people’s falsely-formed assumptions about the afterlife. Many of us think that we’ll join Jesus in the air, be air-vac’d to the clouds, and float around playing harps. No wonder we’re hesitant to pray for Christ’s return! While the images depicted in the verses of our next three studies may be challenging to people, pray that they are also inviting to them. And try not to approach these studies as “let me show you how popular thinking is all wrong” but rather “look at what the scriptures actually say about this – how exciting!”

Please familiarize yourself with all three lessons ahead of time. Because they are so closely related thematically, there will be times when a verse is looked at in one lesson, and the next verse is looked at in the next lesson, expanding on what was introduced in the lesson before – so try to keep people’s attention just on the verses for each particular question, not looking further ahead to the next paragraph in the biblical chapter. (For instance, here in Lesson 7 we’ll be referencing Isaiah 65:17-19. While good inductive Bible study would have us glancing ahead to vv 20-25, we’re going to hold off, coming back to those verses in Lesson 8.)

1) This question introduces the theme of today’s study. Quite often deep longing comes from the Holy Spirit in us – a kind of Romans 8:26 “wordless groans” intercession. As such, longing is closely related to hope, and is different from surface “wants.” In noticing our longings (always trying to discern if they do indeed come from the Holy Spirit) we can become more deeply aware of what God’s desires are for us. For instance, if sitting with someone who’s ill elicits a longing for Jesus to come back soon, we’re reassured that part of his return will be a banishment of sickness and death. If walking through a rural village in poverty stirs a desire for justice, we can be assured that that’s something we can pray towards with confidence that it’s God’s heart, and something God will one day bring to pass. Depending on how deep this sharing is, it may be appropriate to invite the group to pray one-sentence prayers that come out of their longing, ending each prayer with “Come, Lord Jesus!”

2) Obviously this question is a fun one to answer, and the group could spend a long time on it (longer than you have!). You may need to limit the answers to just a few, or have people share in smaller groups of 2-3.

3) Note verse 1: The words of the prophets (from the Old Testament; we’ll look at some of them later in this study), and the teaching of Jesus himself, which is what Peter and the other apostles are quoting - including what we read today from Peter, John, and Paul.

4) The point of the parallel with the flood is this: While God’s judgment will be one of fire burning the earth, it’s a purifying fire, designed to burn away what’s false and leave behind a new earth. Just as Noah and his family returned to a purified earth to live, so we will be living in a new earth. One commentator remarks, “The Greek word for ‘new’

means new in quality, fresh, rather than recent or new in time.” (Alan Johnson in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p 592)

If your group would enjoy further discussion around this, you may also look at 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, which describes our works as being purified by the fire of final judgment, and those things done to the glory of Christ surviving through the fire. (As to what it means to do something to the glory of Christ, see 1 Corinthians 13:13 – those things that are done in “faith, hope, and love.”)

5) Explain to the group that “Jerusalem” (the literal city of Old and New Testament times), where the Temple was, represented the place where God resided with his covenant people. At the return of Christ, when all will be made new, the “new Jerusalem” represents “the church in its future glorified existence,” where God dwells among his people (Alan Johnson, “Revelation” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (p 594)). G.K. Beale describes it as “the intimate, latter-day presence of God and Christ with their people” (G.K. Beale, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, p 1044).

6) The question itself is a straightforward comparison of passages. You may want to note, too, in Revelation 21:3, that the phrases “God’s dwelling place...” and “he will dwell with them” are from the same Greek word that was translated “tent” in Revelation 7:15-17 (which itself uses some of the same language of the Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 passages we’re looking at in this question). God’s dwelling place – once represented in the single location of the Tabernacle and then the Temple – is now fully localized right in the midst of his people, and brings with it comfort and care, life and joy.

7) For these particular verses, note that what the scriptures depict is a new Jerusalem (the dwelling place of God) coming down to a new earth, and Jesus coming down with it to the place where we live (earth, made new). While we do meet him in the air, it does not say that we then return with him to heaven – rather, we meet him in the same way that a crowd runs ahead to greet someone coming to them. British New Testament scholar NT Wright remarks on how these verses make use of the popular Roman practice of a conquering hero being met outside the city gates by his people, and ushered back into the city with them. (See his lectures at the conference *Resurrection and Life after Death: Exploring the Christian Hope*. This reference comes from Talk #4, “The Weight of Glory: The Hope of Bodily Resurrection.”)

The implications of this are terribly important. It gives us a mandate to invest in caring for the earth, natural and social, even now. We’ll explore this more in Lesson 8; for now, just help the group to recognize the point that Jesus will return and live with us here on earth.

8) “Alpha” and “omega” are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and, along with “the Beginning and the End” of Revelation 21:6, they express “God’s control of all

history, especially by bringing it to an end in salvation and judgment. The God who transcends time guides the entire course of history because he stands as sovereign over its beginning and its end.” (G. K. Beale, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, p 199)

Combined with the passages from John 1 and Colossians 1, these verses reveal the deep appropriateness of Jesus living eternity on the new earth. All things were created by him and for him, and through his cross all things are reconciled to him (Colossians 1) – of course he’ll want to return to earth to enjoy them for eternity!

9) The water of life represents eternal life, inherited by those “who are victorious” (v 7). The “victorious” are those “who have maintained their faith in the Lamb’s atoning death and their testimony to his redemptive work. Only those with such faith can have access to ‘the springs of the water’ (the salvific presence of God) on the basis of grace, or ‘without cost’.” (G.K. Beale, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, p 1056)

Note that the water of life is *offered* to all: “To the thirsty I will give the water without cost” (Revelation 21:6); “Let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17); “those who drink the water I give them” (John 4:14); “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink” (John 7:37). But it’s an offer to be received, not a forced drink. Johnson notes that this passage “contains a universal invitation for all who thirst to drink the water of life,” but it “is not a picture of universal salvation.” (Johnson, “Revelation” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p 595)

10) These practices can be varied; encourage people to reply with personal examples, referencing not only specific practices but how they function to increase spiritual thirst. Some examples might be: confession, worship singing, reading the psalms or other passages that depict the fullness awaiting us, fasting, practices of simplicity...

If people are stuck, you may want to reference some scripture passages that show how Jesus encouraged spiritual thirst in his listeners. For example, when the woman at the well (John 4) asked Jesus for the living water he had to offer, Jesus replied with a question that led the woman into confession (and presumably repentance); at other times Jesus would ask a person what they really wanted (i.e. Mark 10:51, “What do you want me to do for you?”; John 5:6, “Do you want to get well?”).

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

## LESSON 8 – *At Home with the Beloved*

1) If people have trouble with this question, try asking it in a different way: “What was something you experienced recently that made you think ‘Ah! This is what eternity will be like!’ or ‘This seems so right! Life is meant to be like this!’”

2) Have fun with this. Keep pushing people’s imaginations. You may find helpful questions such as “Would you dance non-stop for a week? What would you do when you took a break from dancing? What if you didn’t just have to stay dressed up and at the pre-arranged seating tables? Who would you go talk to? What would you do? What if all the godly people you ever knew or read about were there? What would they be doing? What if you had a few days free in between courses at the banquet? What would you do?” etc.

3) These verses in Revelation 21 clearly describe “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem” as the bride of Christ. Yet, as we’ve seen in recent lessons, the biblical Jerusalem is the city filled with God’s people, where God himself resides in their midst, and the new Jerusalem represents the eternal reality of God living in the midst of his faithful people forever – as verse 3 remarks, “God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.” This is represented by the 12 gates representing the 12 tribes of Israel (v 12), and the 12 foundations representing the 12 apostles (v 14) – the fullness of God’s covenant community. Hence, saying that the *city* of the new Jerusalem is the bride is a way of saying that *we*, the covenant community, are the bride of Christ.

We shine “with the glory of God” (v 11), into which we’re being transformed as we pass through suffering (be it outright persecution or simply the long-term process of being tempered through life).

4) Ephesians 5 uses language of groom and bride to describe the relationship between Christ and his Church.

\* We, the Church, are the bride of Christ.

\* Our appearance is radiant, washed clean and without any blemish. We get this way through Christ having given himself up for us (his death on the cross to take away the stain of our sin), making us holy, which we appropriate through “the washing with water through the word.” This is a phrase that causes some confusion amongst scholars; while it might literally reference the water of our baptism, it certainly refers to the metaphorical washing of being cleansed through the work of Christ (see John 3:5; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:23), a work which we encounter and are nurtured in through the scriptures (the word).

\* You may want to think about some of the older “saints” in your congregation – those whose faces shine more and more with the love of Christ and the glory of God as they age.

5) Note that the light causes things of darkness to flee. (Examples: basement bugs, nighttime prowlers and criminals, anxious fears that assault us in the night.) This is why

confession – naming wrongness and sin out loud before others – is so effective; once brought out into the light, sin loses its power.

6) “Nations” and “kings of the earth” – i.e. people representing all cultures and people groups, bringing with them the best of their culture. This is a fulfillment of God’s intentions early in Genesis, when our mandate was to develop the earth. And it is an impetus to missions outreach to all language/culture groups in the world: not that all people will be saved, but that some from each culture will be, and so we must take the Gospel to each people group before the kingdom can be ushered in in all its fullness. If we merely look at a map of governmental states, we may be tempted to think this has already happened; there are some Christians on every continent, for instance. But if we look at what missiologists call “people groups” – people who speak their own language and have a unique culture—there are still many unreached people. One estimate is that there are over 16,000 people groups in the world, of which 6600 (40%) count as being unreached (with no church in their midst witnessing to the Gospel in their own heart language).

For more information on unreached people and the missions that are reaching out to them, visit the following websites:

US Center for World Missions <http://www.uscwm.org>

Global Prayer Digest <http://www.global-prayer-digest.org>

Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship <http://www.pff.net>

Outreach Foundation <http://www.theoutreachfoundation.org>

7) The core of each example is:

- Exodus 12:33-36, 35:4-9,20-29 (the Israelites bring gifts to Moses for the new sanctuary – most probably gifts they took with them from the Egyptians)
- 1 Kings 10:1-10 (the Queen of Sheba – part of Egypt – comes to Solomon and God’s new Temple at Jerusalem, with gifts)
- Ezra 1:1-11 (the exiles return to Jerusalem, carrying gifts from the King of Persia and their Persian neighbors)
- Isaiah 60:1-14 (a prophecy about the nations bringing gifts)
- Matthew 2:1-2,11 (the wise men come from distant nations, bringing gifts to Jesus)

All of these are gifts brought from the nations to some form or another of the place where God resides (the center of worship). The point is that the new Jerusalem/new heavens and new earth will be filled with the best of what this earth has produced.

8) The Garden of Eden! (See Genesis 2-3)

For specific parallels, note

Genesis 2:8-19, Tree of Life at center

Genesis 2:10, river watering the Garden

Genesis 3:8, God living with his people

Revelation 22:2, Tree of Life at center

Revelation 22:1, river of water of life

Revelation 22:3-5, God living with his people

In the new earth:

Genesis 3:22-24, people kept from tree of life;

Genesis 3:19, death

and

Revelation 22:2, leaves of the tree for all to take, for healing and eternal life

Genesis 3:14a, 17b, people, earth cursed

and

Revelation 22:3, no more curse

Genesis 3:17-18, tending the earth made difficult

and

(Isaiah 65:21-23, a verse we're about to look at)

9) Note the language of v 20. Although this seems to imply that there will still be death, it's really just a poetic way of saying there won't be death – what we know now as tragic death (infants dying, people dying before their time) will be no more; indeed what we think of now as the natural time to die (old age) will still be viewed as young, having eternal years left to live. Isaiah's prophecies, as is the case with the prophetic genre, operate on different levels simultaneously, speaking both to the present-day circumstances of his contemporaries as well as speaking ahead to the eschatology (end times, eternity). So the language must be taken as both literal and figurative at the same time, aided in interpretation by the rest of the scriptures.

10) In Genesis 3, part of the curse against sin was that Adam's "vocation" – tending the earth – was made difficult (see Genesis 3:17-19); indeed the ground itself was affected by the curse. In the Isaiah prophecy, planting (as representative of all types of 'work of our hands', v 22) will occur with ease and be productive again. This is how God originally intended nature to respond to our care.

11) Our "reigning" in the new heavens and new earth has been alluded to throughout Revelation – see 1:6, 5:10, 7:15. It's part of our created identity, being made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-28) to rule the earth as his representatives, bringing out its goodness and potential to the glory of God. This calling remains through eternity, when we will live into it without the messiness or frustrations of sin.

12) Isaiah 65 gives just a few examples. Encourage the group to think of other parts of life besides building houses and planting vineyards. Ask them what parts of life they love now, and what those might look like in eternity where there's no sin to frustrate it all. Obviously this extends into the realm of imagination, but offer your imaginations to the Lord, and use this to strengthen our longing for how all will be made right, to the glory of God.

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.

## LESSON 9 – *Come, Our Beloved!*

1) As we mentioned in the last lesson, this kind of awareness is intended to shape our prayer. So after the group shares, either as a whole or in sub-groups of 2 or 3, you may want to invite people each to turn what they shared into a one-sentence prayer. For instance, if someone shared about a time in the past several days when they caught themselves dismayed at discord in their home, and they realized “Aha! This won’t be in eternity!” then their prayer might be “Thank you, Lord, that there will be no more fighting in your kingdom.” Or, if they were watching the news and saw soldiers passing out water at a refugee camp, they might pray “Thank you, Lord, that all weapons of war will be laid down, and you will give life and refreshment to all in your kingdom,” etc.

2) Be aware of the potential difficulty of wedding imagery for any who are single. If those who are married start giving a lot of “wonderful” sounding details, go out of your way to invite the singles into the conversation, talking about when you were on the family or friend’s side of the wedding planning rather than being the bride, etc.

3) God has made known this revelation so that we may ‘take it to heart’ (1:3) – in other words, have it affect how we live now. The only timeline mentioned is “soon” and “near.” The point of saying “soon” is that we all should live as if Jesus’ return is about to happen – as indeed, given our short lifespan, it is! Whether it is in 2 days or 2 millennia, each of us will live into this within the next few decades, if not sooner.

4) This question gets at the heart of worship: over time, we become like what we worship.

\* It can be confusing to try to understand the concept of hardening of hearts, so you may want to discuss the reality of how idolatry (the opposite of “worshiping God” in Revelation 22:9) affects people’s hearts, increasingly hardening them against God, so that they become unable to hear and to respond. (See Isaiah 6:9-10, and Jesus’ warning in Matthew 13:9-17.)

\* On the other hand, if we’re worshiping God, we continue to grow more like him. God himself is “Holy” (which literally means “set apart”). Explore this question in terms of “What are we worshiping – what are we giving our hearts to on a daily basis?”

5) The NIV Study Bible footnote for 2 Peter 3:12 reads: “That day may be hastened by God’s people as they speed up the accomplishment of his purposes. Since he is waiting for all who will come to repentance (v 9), the sooner believers bring others to the Savior the sooner that day will dawn (please see Acts 3:19-20). Prayer also serves to hasten the day (Matthew 6:10), as does holy living (v 11).”

6) Note that knowledge of Jesus always transforms us. It transforms us into his image, to his glory. If we are reading the Bible and going to Bible studies and sitting under good preaching but not seeing changes in our character and behavior, then we are somehow resisting the living Word of God.

The Take Home suggestions each week have included ways of praying a brief passage of scripture slowly and attentively, keeping us present to it long enough for it to soak into us more deeply, and helping us notice what the Holy Spirit is doing in us with the living word.

7) Note the interplay between waiting (vv 19, 23) that is not bored or passive but eager and active. In this passage, the “active” is described as praying, and letting the Holy Spirit pray in us.

8) Note that the reality of Revelation 21 and 22, which we pray, is what we have been praying over the past several weeks. Hopefully our Reflection suggestions at the end of each lesson, shaping our regular practices of reflective examen, have been teaching us how to notice and pray into the reality of eternity.

The Trinity is active in our prayer. The Holy Spirit is praying in us – in those gut-deep longings that we are growing in noticing – and he is praying what Jesus is revealing from the Father.

Encourage the group to expand their praying, from the common intercession lists to kingdom praying, listening to how the Holy Spirit is praying God’s eternal purposes and joining in on that prayer.

9) Note that in this particular parable, the difference isn’t that one group is alert and the other sleepy (even though other scripture texts exhort us to wait with alertness – see Mark 13:26-27). The difference is that the one group is prepared to go out to meet the bridegroom when he arrives and the other is not. It is the nature of a parable to make one main point, using a storytelling method. Here, in the context of a story about a wedding where the bridegroom’s arrival comes so late that the maidens have naturally fallen asleep, Jesus exhorts his hearers to be ready so that no matter how long they feel they have waited, and even if the trumpet call has had to rouse them into alertness, they are ready to respond when it does.

10) To wait like the foolish maidens is to live as if the bridegroom won’t come. To wait like the wise maidens is to live knowing that he will, and to live so that we are preparing to meet him. Encourage specific examples – we get to know his voice and his ways (familiarity with the scriptures), we don the clothes he has prepared for us (righteousness), we prepare the table (worship) and the hall (deeds of righteousness around us) and extend the invitation to others...

11) This is the hope that Revelation holds out to us – the Lord is coming back, and he is coming soon. We wait in hope, holding to the promise, praying the promise. And we don’t wait in fear (which is what many of the studies of Revelation seek to instill in their readers) - we wait in grace.

Prayer) See notes at the end of Lesson 1 for how to lead this prayer.