

**BIBLE AS SECOND LANGUAGE**  
**SESSION TWELVE**  
**REVELATION—HANGING ON TO FAITH**

Hi, My name is Ron Baesler and I am Pastor of Spiritual Growth at Messiah Lutheran Church in Yorba Linda, California. Welcome to the final session of our Bible as Second Language Overview Course. I hope that you have gotten a better sense of how the many parts of the Bible reflect the larger story of God at work creating and reclaiming this world.

This session is called **Revelation: Hanging On to Faith**. I also hope that you have gone through the other sessions before you look at this one.

I want to make sure that you have a clear sense of the Gospel, the Good News of the Kingdom. Jesus made the rulership of God real in his life, death and ministry.

The early Christians proclaimed this same Good News of the Kingdom with their message about their Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus and by living out His call to loving service. If you don't have a clear grasp of that wonderful Good News before you come to the book of Revelation, you could get confused or even scared out of your wits. It is easy to get lost and even fall into a swamp of despair when you read this book.

This last book in our Bible has had all kinds of reviews throughout history. Some of the very earliest Christian teachers and scholars accepted it as Holy Scripture while others rejected it. Even after it was accepted as part of the biblical canon, that is, as part of the official list of biblical books, Revelation was a disputed book.

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation either ignored it or distanced themselves from it. Ever since its appearance this book has been used by small fringe groups and individuals to draw all sorts of strange conclusions about the end of the world. I would call this a misuse of Revelation, but because of this widespread misuse many preachers and teachers shy away from the book.

Even more than most of the other books in our Bible, Revelation needs to be understood within its historical time and place. To help us, let me give you four snapshots from the past.

### **Snapshot #1.**

We are in Rome, 64AD, about 35 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Small groups of Christians are scattered throughout the Roman Empire. To this point, the Roman government has generally ignored the Christian movement. But that is about to end. The Christian community in

Rome is made up mostly of slaves and poor people. The Roman populace, especially the middle and upper classes are suspicious of this group. Nero is the current emperor, having poisoned his father and executed his mother for treason.

On July 18<sup>th</sup>, 64AD a great fire breaks out in Rome. Rumor has it that Nero wanted to make room for his grandiose urban renewal projects so he torched the city. But Nero blames the Christians. He orders them to be rounded up, covers some of them with tar and uses them for torches and throws others to wild animals in the arena. Finally, even the Romans are appalled by Nero's excesses and in 68AD he is deposed. Rumors continue to sweep through the empire—Nero has committed suicide, Nero has fled east and will return to take vengeance. Solid, stable Rome seems to be beginning to crack.

### **Snapshot #2.**

We are in Jerusalem, 70AD. After four years of civil war, the Roman general Titus destroys Jerusalem, the holy city of Jews and Christians. For many years the Roman government had given the Jews a measure of religious freedom. They had extended that freedom to the Christians, seeing them as simply another Jewish sect. Now Jerusalem has been destroyed and its citizens slaughtered by the thousands. The Christians throughout the

empire fear they are next on the enemy hit list. The air is full of rumors, whispers and dark foreboding.

### **Snapshot #3.**

August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 79AD, Italy. The top of Mount Vesuvius blows apart. The earth shakes and thunders, the sea rages, the air is filled with a deafening roar. Stones hail down from the sky. Fire and sulfurous smoke shoot up from the crater, then a cloud of white hot ashes falls, slaying beasts, fish, birds and humans. The sky is black for four days. The proud cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii lie buried. Over 20,000 die. People all over the region are totally terrified. Frightening prophecies of doom fill the country. People believe that chaos is breaking in upon the world and will soon swallow everything.

### **Snapshot #4.**

95AD, Rome. For the last fourteen years, a man named Domitian has been the emperor. According to a writer of the time, Domitian is “the beast from hell, sitting in its den, licking blood.” Domitian has declared himself “God the Lord” and has decreed that everyone in his empire must openly worship him. The only ones to openly resist him are the Christians. Domitian declares war against the Christians and against the Christ they worship.

In 95AD Domitian hears about a man named John who is preaching that the Roman empire will some day come to an end and the real ruler of the world will come. Domitian arrests him, has him brought to Rome, questions him, tortures him and finally banishes him to a tiny convict island called Patmos. The congregations that John leaves behind are persecuted mercilessly. Arrests, tortures, murders....Domitian makes Nero look like a Boy Scout!

The world seems very dark for the Christians. God seems very far away. Any day their faith could slip beneath the waves of despair.

Snapshots 1, 2 and 3 are well attested by nearly all historians and scholars.

Not all of them agree with the details in snapshot #4, but they do agree that the times around 95AD when Revelation was written were very uncertain times for Christians, times of anxiety and fear, times when evil seemed about to overpower good.

To a fearful people, living in a time of uncertainty, John writes Revelation. He identifies himself this way:

*I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. **Revelation 1:9***

The language, structure and grammar of Revelation suggest that this John is NOT the same John who wrote the Gospel or the Epistles. Without a doubt, those who received this letter knew who the author was and that was enough for them. It is very clear that this document IS a letter meant to be read aloud.

*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.*

### ***Revelation 1:3***

Just as we learned in our last session, a letter is directed to a specific group, dealing with a specific situation. We need to remember that as we read Revelation. In the first place we are reading someone else's mail! How does the Spirit continue to use this letter for the church today? We will look at that at the end of this session.

The name of this document comes from the first word in the Greek text: *αποκαλυψις* *apocalypsis* which means "Revelation". Please notice that 'revelation' is singular, not plural. John isn't give out all sorts of tidbits about the future or the end of the world. He is not sharing revelations. His letter is called Revelation because there is really only one thing worth

revealing, there is only one thing his audience needs to know. What is that one thing? We'll see in a few moments!

Before we jump into the message of this letter, I need to warn you about the world we are about to enter. This world is full of visions, dreams, monsters, strange creatures, bizarre visions, numbers and symbols, all of which can leave your head spinning. We will find ourselves in the middle of cosmic battles and in heavenly scenes that seem to almost defy description. You may be moved to say, 'there is nothing else like this! This is utterly unique!'

You would be wrong. In its style, structure, and world view, Revelation is not unique. It belongs to a type of writing that is called 'apocalyptic literature.' We have examples of such writings in other documents of that time. We have examples of such writing within our own Bible. Mark 13:3-37 and the parallel texts in Matthew and Luke are examples in the New Testament.

Chapters 7-12 in the book of Daniel are also apocalyptic in style. Listen to the beginning of chapter 7:

*In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream: I, Daniel, saw in my vision by night the four winds of heaven stirring up the great sea, and four great beasts came up out of the sea, different from one*

*another. The first was like a lion and had eagles' wings. Then, as I watched, its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a human being; and a human mind was given to it. Another beast appeared, a second one, that looked like a bear. It was raised up on one side, had three tusks in its mouth among its teeth and was told, 'Arise, devour many bodies!'* **Daniel 7:1-5**

Apocalyptic writing deals with the end times from a particular perspective.

It envisions an end to human history brought about by some force outside of history. It sees this end or fulfillment of human history in terms of a battle between good and evil. Apocalyptic writing uses language symbolically and often cryptically and is intended for an insider audience.

OK. Now, at last, it is time to jump in to this letter. The first chapter is an introduction and a preparation. John announces that he will tell “what must soon take place” and that “the time is near.” Then he identifies himself and his listeners.

*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, **Revelation 1:4***

Asia was the name of the Roman province on the western coast of Turkey.

In Chapters 2 and 3 John presents the words he has heard in his vision, words spoken by the risen and exalted Christ to seven churches. We know

of more than seven early congregations in this region. Is this only meant for seven or is seven a symbol for completeness? Or is it a symbol for something else entirely? We could ask such questions with every step of our journey through this letter. You will see sevens on almost every page!

Again, we must keep in mind that this letter was originally meant to be read aloud to an audience, most likely in a worship setting. If you are sitting and listening you don't have time to analyze every word, every image. The impact of the letter is more like the impact of a symphony; its power is in the overall effect. You are moved by the sweep and flow of the entire piece.

As we read this letter it becomes very clear that both the writer and the audience knew the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Even though John never cites texts directly you can find almost 500 allusions to Old Testament passages in his letter. Clearly he was speaking out of their faith tradition into their current situation. To use a phrase we used in the very beginning of our sessions, he was speaking from faith for faith.

I encourage you to read these seven short letters. They give us an idea of the dynamics of these early Christian communities and the challenges they faced. They sound eerily familiar to those of us familiar with congregational life today: tensions between members, conflicts with a hedonistic society, competing theological viewpoints, confusion over the basics of the faith, hostility from a pluralistic culture. Over and over again these congregations are encouraged to maintain their “patient endurance.” This means they are to actively hang on and persist in the faith.

To every congregation Christ makes a promise:

*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.* **Revelation 3:20-21**

They are invited to “conquer” as Jesus Christ himself conquered. He conquered by surrendering his will entirely to God, and giving himself up in sacrificial love. All of the people to whom John is writing need to face the possibility that their faith may lead to their death.

I invite you to listen now as John begins to relate his vision in chapter 4:

*After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’ At once I was in the*

*spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.*

*Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,  
'Holy, holy, holy,  
the Lord God the Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come.'* **Revelation 4:1-8**

What are we to do with passages like this? So many misuses have been made of Revelation because people refuse to accept it for what it is in the first place: a document prepared for people in the last part of the first century whose faith was under fire. They were the first audience and any insight and hope we receive from Revelation must recognize and accept that and not stand in contradiction to that message.

John is writing to Christians who were hanging on to their faith by their fingertips. Powerful forces and fears raged through their land. Over and over again, throughout this letter we hear phrases like this one from Chap. 5:

*'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honour and glory and blessing!'  
Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and  
in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,  
'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honour and glory and might  
for ever and ever!'  
And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and  
worshipped.*

In and through all of these visions, battles, numbers and symbols, John's message throbs again and again: **Jesus and Jesus alone is Lord, not Nero, not Domitian, not Titus. Jesus is the Lord of history. Jesus and Jesus alone will determine your destiny.**

For the next 13 chapters John recounts what God has written on the scroll containing the immediate future, the future of the listeners. Only this Lamb, the Christ who was sacrificed for our sins, is worthy to read it. John describes the scenes in vivid Technicolor! And the number seven is everywhere! Seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls, seven last plagues. Seven is the number of completeness and is a symbolic way of saying that when seven comes, the kingdom of God comes.

If seven is completeness, what about six? The most famous number in Revelation, and maybe in the entire Bible is found at the end of chapter 13:

*This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred and sixty-six.*

Those people who see Revelation as a giant religious crossword puzzle or sudoku puzzle have had all kinds of wild theories about this number and the 'beast' it represents.

Over the centuries people have "proven" that 666 was the number of Luther, the number of the Roman Catholic Church, of Adolph Hitler. You can find internet sites today that tell you that 666 refers to bar codes, social security numbers, the current or past president. If you see Revelation as a puzzle to solve then there is no end to the answers you can come up with for this number or for any of the other symbols in this letter.

If seven refers to completeness and the coming of the coming, then perhaps six refers to the judgment that precedes the kingdom. Biblical scholar Dr. M. Eugene Boring suggests that "six-six-six" is the intensive symbolic expression of incompleteness, idolatry, judgment, nonfulfillment. It may represent evil itself raised to the third power" (**Revelation**, M. Eugene Boring, p163).

But like any good work of art this symbol evokes more than one meaning. By the way this verse is stated, John probably also had in mind a particular

person. Every letter in the Hebrew and Greek alphabet has a numerical value. The Hebrew letters of Nero Caesar add up to 666. As I mentioned earlier, the rumor that an avenging Nero would reappear was part of the pervasive anxiety of the time.

In Chapters 17 and 18 we have the last scenes written on this scroll of this near future and they depict the fall of Babylon. Babylon?? Wait a minute: Didn't John write more than 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection? And didn't Babylon exist 600 years before Jesus was even born? And didn't the Persians destroy Babylon over 500 years before Jesus was born? The answer to all 3 questions is YES. So where does Babylon come in?

Once again, John uses a powerful image from the past to call up not one, but a host of images and emotions. Most directly Babylon refers to Rome. In 586BC the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem. In 70AD the Roman army destroyed Jerusalem. Quite naturally, John and the listeners could make the connection: Babylon equals Rome, Rome equals Babylon.

But why doesn't John just come out and say "Rome"? We could think that maybe he's trying to camouflage his message from the Roman authorities but that seems unlikely if you listen to what he has to say about the great whore and where she is seated:

*'This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; **Revelation 17:9***

Quite obviously he is talking about the seven hills of Rome. I believe John uses Babylon instead of Rome because like all great artists John wants to communicate meaning on a variety of levels. He does not simply want to communicate information, he wants to stir hearts, strengthen faltering spirits. Although Rome claimed that the beneficent mother goddess Roma was its patroness, John insists that Rome really is

*'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.' And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. **Revelation 17:5-6***

John gives to his anxious, maybe even terrified listeners the news that Rome's days are numbered.

*Alas, alas, the great city,  
where all who had ships at sea  
grew rich by her wealth!  
For in one hour she has been laid waste.'*

*Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgement for you against her. **Revelation 18:19-20***

In and through all of these violent images, John proclaims the message:  
Don't give in to Rome, don't give up your faith, God is still in charge and  
God will have the last word.

John's letter closes with 4 chapters that paint a magnificent picture of the ultimate future that God has in store for those who patiently endure these times of great suffering and persecution. John returns to the number seven and presents seven scenes of God's ultimate triumph. Many people have been seduced by teachers who claim they can develop a timetable for the end from John's visions. Is John suggesting a chronology of events? For the most part I think not.

I believe we should understand the scenes in these chapters, and in many of Revelation's chapters, more like images in a kaleidoscope than like pictures on a strip of film. John is not trying to narrate a movie that God has allowed him to preview. John is communicating an all encompassing vision. As Chapter 4, verse 1 says, John was lifted high above our reality and allowed to see all things and all times laid out before him, all at once. He stands on this lofty vista and in every direction he sees new wonders.

The great whore of Babylon was the symbol of the pagan, persecuting, destructive power of a sinful world. In this last section the new Jerusalem is the symbol of the heavenly, healing power of God in the new creation.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*‘See, the home of God is among mortals.  
He will dwell with them;  
they will be his peoples,  
and God himself will be with them;  
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more;  
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,  
for the first things have passed away.’*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. **Revelation 21:1-7***

Can you imagine the anxious, fearful people sitting in their small group, hearing these powerful, comforting words from their Lord Jesus sitting on his throne? Surely some wept for joy, some sighed with relief, some grimly hoped it was all true.

The book of Revelation is a pastoral letter sent to people threatened by persecution because of their faith. Some of them may have already lost family members, property, and a place in the community because they claimed Jesus as Lord. How much longer could they hang on? Could they endure what was possibly in store for them in the future? To these people John writes a message meant to assure them, encourage them, and give them hope.

What about us? What does Revelation say to us? Many people have argued that it says very little that is useful or helpful for modern Christians. I'll admit that I haven't often turned to Revelation for inspiration. But could it be that some books speak more clearly and loudly at different times in history? Here is an example of when Revelation proved important.

Hans Lilje was a leader of the Christian movement that resisted Adolph Hitler in Germany. He was arrested and was only 30 minutes away from being executed when the Allied forces arrived. According to Hans Lilje, the Book of Revelation never meant much to him or to his congregations before the war.

But, after the war, as these beleaguered Christians sat in the ruins of their country, of their church, and of their entire way of life, they turned to

Revelation. The stunning words of hope in the midst of darkness and despair, the rousing praises sung by those who had endured the great tribulation, all of the cosmic dramas painted in vivid colors---all of Revelation did for them what it did for the very first listeners. It helped them keep their grip on their faith, and keep hope alive when all around them was chaos.

The book of Revelation is a pastoral letter. Its message that Christ is the victorious Lamb of God and that God will have the final say in history is an important message for all times and places, but it is especially relevant for Christians who are threatened by persecution or by the chaos of evil.

Revelation is the last of the 66 books in our Bible. It stands at the end because its message is about the end times. I believe we need to understand its message the way we understand the Genesis message about the beginning of time. All of life, all of history belongs to God. Both the beginning and ending stories are less about the 'how' and the 'when' of our universe and much more about the 'why' and the 'who'---why are we here and who is responsible. The Bible is the story of God creating, loving, rescuing and restoring this world and its rebellious inhabitants.

The Bible's story continues to be written not on the pages of a book but in the lives of Christians and in their world. By the power of the Holy Spirit God continues to use the Bible's words to make the living Lord present, to guide, challenge and support us. As that old farmer said in our very first session, "every day, we open the Bible and there we are, we're in it, God's people, on their way to the promised land."

Thank you for listening and being a part of our BSL project. I'd love to hear from you, your reactions, comments and suggestions. Blessings.

### **Some Questions to Ponder**

1. Revelation was written during very trying times. What aspects of contemporary life are causing instability, anxiety and confusion?
2. As you read the seven letters to the seven churches, do you discover anything that might relate to your congregation or to a church community you are familiar with?
3. How does a work of art 'communicate'? How does a symphony move you? How might the message of Revelation be understood as an artistic effort?

### **If you want to dig deeper**

<http://demo.lutherproductions.com/bibletutor/level1/program/start/books/menu.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/>

[http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Apoc\\_Def.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Apoc_Def.htm)

<http://www.luthersem.edu/ckoester/Revelation/main.htm>