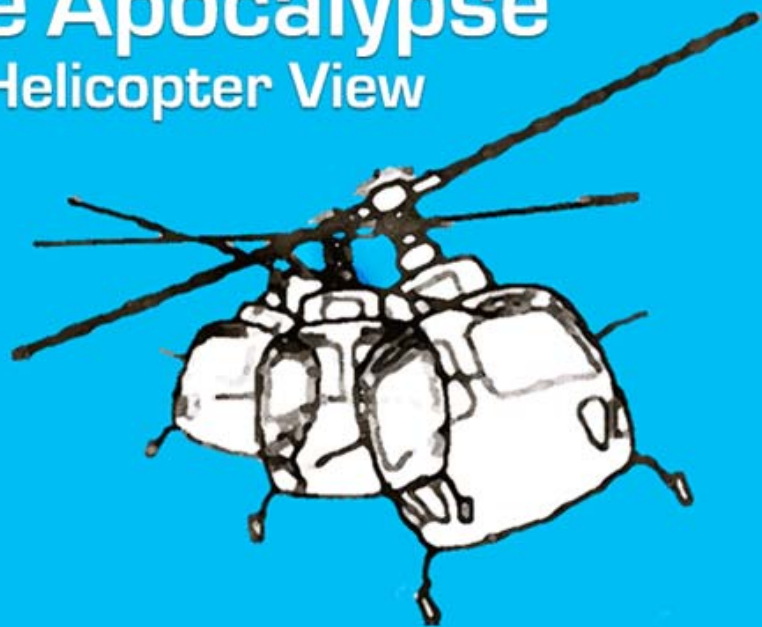


The Apocalypse

a Helicopter View



Steve Singleton

An underwater scene featuring two dolphins swimming towards the viewer, a scuba diver in the upper center, and a vibrant coral reef at the bottom. The background is a deep blue with light rays filtering down. The text 'DeeperStudy.com' is overlaid in the top left, and 'When you want to go deeper in your Bible study' is centered in the middle.

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**When you want to go deeper
in your Bible study**

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Prologue

The Book of Revelation! The Apocalypse! People either love it or hate it; they fear it or avoid it altogether. Many who wade in at the shallow end soon find themselves sinking over their heads in hot water. They immediately climb out and run to the far end where they think it is again shallow and comfortably warm. When the Apocalypse comes up in conversation, some close their minds and their mouths and switch on blank stares. Others show by their animated and opinionated jabbering that long ago, their minds were set—in concrete! Still others look around, frantically searching for an escape route.

Let me reassure you. I intend for this study guide to open your mind and calm your nerves about the Book of Revelation. The Apocalypse was not meant to create terror

and dismay but to engender confidence and hope. And despite what you may have heard to the contrary, its message—even down to many of the details—can be understandable to the modern reader. In fact, the phrase, “The time is near” that occurs in the opening paragraph of the Book of Revelation is a key to understanding the prophecy as a whole. Once you grasp the concept of viewing it from the perspective of the original reader, most of the hard work of interpreting it is done.

I have designed this material to be usable in a number of ways. You can get a quick overview, which will guide you to the essential parts of the Introduction and brief summaries of each chapter. You can compare the various schools of interpretation, or study a particular passage. The annotated bibliography can guide you to a more extensive inquiry.

Of course, nothing will help you more than actually reading the text of Revelation. It is the only book of the Bible that pronounces a blessing on the person who will read it (Rev. 1:3). The best way to start is to read it in its entirety all at once, and if possible, aloud. This takes about 90 minutes. Then, of course, you should read each chapter again as you go through this study guide. You should also read those parts of the Old Testament that form the main sources for the concepts and imagery in the Apocalypse, particularly Ezekiel and Daniel.

As you read, focus on the main message of Revelation; it is easy to slog through the

swamp of the details and never look up to see the mountains towering in the distance. But surely those mountains—the holy influence of a godly life, the resurrected Redeemer, and the ultimate victory of God—are your final destination. My hope is that you will make it safely through that swamp and explore those thrilling heights. Perhaps this study guide can serve as a compass.

Those of us who study Revelation can be “Overcomers” in two senses. First we can overcome all of the obstacles that time and misinterpretation have created that hinder understanding this powerful part of God’s Word. Second, we can actually experience what the original readers of the Apocalypse did—we ourselves can become Overcomers.

My thanks to the many students through the years whose questions and comments have helped me to focus on what is important and to de-emphasize what is not. I am grateful to my family, my wife Cindy and my children, Jonathan, Michael, and Jennifer, without whose enthusiastic encouragement this study guide would still be only a vision. I have learned more from you than you have from me. Thank you, Cindy, for constantly reminding me to keep it practical. I hope someday that "the word of my testimony" is as courageous as yours.

Ruler Over the Kings of the Earth (Rev. 1)

“Overcoming,” in a word, is the theme of Revelation, from a practical point of view. Whatever struggles lay ahead for the Christians of the Roman province of Asia and whatever challenges confront us twenty centuries later, God reveals for us the secret to overcoming.

John opens Revelation by clearly explaining the source and the time-frame of the prophecy. It is from the Godhead, mediated to John through an angel. Twice in the opening paragraph, John says these events will “soon take place” and “the time is near.” This means we should understand the predictions of Revelation as short-range prophecies, that is, pertaining to events that would occur within the life-span of the original recipients of the book.

Does this mean that Revelation has no message for us today? Of course not. In a similar way books like Philippians and James were written to contemporary groups of Christians addressing their own special concerns. But we certainly get a great deal of benefit from reading them because we believe the truths they contain transcend the immediate situations of the original readers. Likewise Revelation speaks to us, even though only a few, if any, of its predictions remain to be fulfilled in our future. We will see these practical applications as the book unfolds for us chapter by chapter.

John describes for us his encounter with a glorious personage who turns out to be Jesus Christ Himself. The details of His appearance symbolize the Savior's wisdom, purity, and power in a most dynamic way. No one could be more glorious or powerful than He is, nor could anyone be more concerned for His saints.

The key idea of chapter one, and one of the most important themes of the entire book, is found in verses 5: "And from Jesus Christ, who is... the ruler of the kings of the earth." Because Christ is exalted to the highest place, because He is ruler over those who would harm His saints, His people need never be afraid. He has proven His personal love for the saints by laying down His life for them, freeing them from their sins, and making them into a kingdom of priests. Even now He walks among the lampstands (the churches), inspecting them, correcting them, and then defending them.

He has blazed the trail His saints must tread by becoming the faithful Witness (martyr) and then the Firstborn from the dead. They too must be faithful witnesses, willing if need be to seal their testimony with their own blood. They too are confident of a resurrection to life eternal. Meanwhile, they are reigning with Christ in His present kingdom. They are not helpless and defenseless before the military might of the Roman Empire. They are, in fact, the true conquerors—not in and of themselves, but because of their Master.

What Christ Thinks of the Churches (Rev. 2-3)

When Jesus looks at the church today, what does He think? Do we please Him who gave Himself up for us? By reading Revelation, chapters two and three, we can gain insight about how we are doing as Christians. Jesus critiques seven churches from the province of Asia. We know there were more than that in the province because churches existed in Colossae and Hierapolis (Col. 1:1 and Col. 4:13). Why did Jesus choose these seven and no more?

Since Revelation elsewhere makes clear that seven is a number symbolic of completeness, perhaps Jesus chose these seven as representative of all the other churches. Bible students through many years have found that one or another of these letters addresses nearly every possible condition of local congregations to some degree.

One church is rich; another is poor (Laodicea and Smyrna); one has disfellowshipped false apostles while another tolerates a self-proclaimed prophetess (Ephesus and Thyatira); one is doing more now than at the beginning while a sister church has lost the love it had at first (Thyatira and Ephesus). Two are being harassed by non-Christian Jews (Smyrna and Philadelphia), while another lives in the very shadow of Satan's throne (Pergamum). The Christians in one are about to suffer imprisonment and perhaps even death for Christ; another will escape the coming hour of trial (Smyrna and Philadelphia). One is lukewarm, another is spiritually dead (Laodicea and Sardis). Two receive only praise (Smyrna and Philadelphia). One receives only rebuke (Laodicea). The rest are praised for their strengths and corrected for their faults.

To every church the Lord says that He knows their situation. He understands what a time Ephesus has had with false teachers. While appreciating their concern for healthy teaching, He grieves that they no longer love as they did at first. This is a common problem we can characterize as the Ephesian Pendulum Syndrome. Somehow, they must learn not to be too harsh in their efforts to rid their church of heresies. Of course, they could easily slip into the opposite problem, tolerating too much in the name of love. Christ demands of all of us to love the truth of God's Word and love the people that Word brings into God's family. The heresy hunter must avoid a harsh, judgmental spirit. Christ calls on the Ephesians to repent and go back to the way they loved at the beginning. Only then will they be overcomers.

To the Christians in Smyrna, Christ is only encouraging. He is aware of their troubles, that they are both financially destitute and suffer persecution from the unbelieving Jews. He exhorts them to focus on their spiritual riches and to face the short trials looming ahead. He promises them that if they will stay loyal, even through death, He will reward them with the overcomer's crown of life. The danger for a poor church and for a church taking one hit after another from a hostile community is to become discouraged or intimidated. Christians in such churches could easily think their sacrifices don't count for much or their risk-taking has no value. But Jesus sees what's going on. To Him it counts. He coaches us to endure to the end, where awaits our prize.

Pergamene Christians lived at the capital of the province—inside the beltway where power broker demand favors and pay them back in a dog-eat-dog environment. In Pergamum, as in Washington and many another modern city, compromise is the key to surviving and to gaining success. This principle of business and politics does not work in Christ's church. Jesus calls Christians who compromise with the world followers of Balaam, whose philosophy was, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" These erring Christians were forsaking the purity of the Christian life-style to blend in with their worldly friends. Sound familiar?

Another straying group in the Pergamum church were known as the Nicolaitans,

meaning “victorious people.” Perhaps its leaders erroneously taught that God’s grace gives us license to sin as much as we please. Paul’s detractors had earlier accused him of the same teaching, though he strongly denounced it (see Romans 6). Whether Christians today actually advocate this verbally or only in practice, Nicolaitan-like abuse of God’s grace (if that is what the Nicolaitans taught) is still with us 2000 years after the Pergamenes received Christ’s rebuke.

The church of Thyatira had many praiseworthy qualities. Their love was still growing. They had endured through tough times. They demonstrated their faith by practical service. Nevertheless, one influential woman was causing many to fall away from Christ. Jesus calls her “Jezebel” after the Sidonian princess who married King Ahab and led all Israel into the worship of Baal.

The first-century “Jezebel” was apparently making converts by telling pagans they could become Christians while continuing to attend dinner parties at the city’s pagan temples and with their guild meetings with official idolatrous opening ceremonies. “We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world,” she may have argued. “There is no God but one” (like the arrogant Corinthian Christians, see 1 Cor. 8:4). In this way she was underestimating the power of pagan religion and of the strong pull of those social get togethers. As a result of her teaching, Thyatirans young in the faith were being led into sexual immorality and the worship of idols. All this is granting “Jezebel”