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Session Guide

GOD WINS

A Look at the Mysteries of Revelation

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

SESSION 1	Introduction to Revelation	5
SESSION 2	Jesus and the Seven Churches (Revelation 1-3)	17
SESSION 3	A Look into Heaven (Revelation 4-7)	29
SESSION 4	Seven Trumpets of Judgment (Revelation 8-11)	37
SESSION 5	Unique Personalities (Revelation 12-14)	45
SESSION 6	Seven Angels and Seven Bowls (Revelation 15-19)	53
SESSION 7	And He Shall Reign for a Thousand Years (Revelation 20)	59
SESSION 8	The New Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22)	69

SESSION 1

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

❖ SCRIPTURE

Revelation 1:1-3, 9-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (optional)

❖ WARM-UP

Which of the following describe you? (Check as many as apply.)

- I have never read the entire book of Revelation and am interested in learning more about it.
- I generally avoid reading Revelation because it seems confusing and difficult.
- I tend to confine my reading of Revelation to familiar chapters like the description of the new earth at the end of the book.
- I'd like to understand the "Left Behind" viewpoint some Christians have on the book of Revelation and the end times.
- I'd really like to better understand this book and what it says to us today.
- I'm skeptical—I really don't think anyone can make much sense of this mysterious book.
- Other: _____

❖ VIDEO NOTES

❖ VIDEO DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Read Revelation 1:1, 9-11. Then jot down some basic facts about

- the author, John.
- the date and location of writing.
- the meaning of “Revelation” and who was to be revealed.
- the original audience and reason for writing.
- the role of visions/symbols.

2. Break into groups of two to four persons. With others in your group, attempt to make two timelines, the first showing the “Left Behind” or premillennial view, the second showing the Reformed historical or amillennial view. On the left side of your timeline, write “incarnation”; on the right side, write “eternity.” Then fill in the details as best you can. Extra credit if you can list some of the sub-events (like the mark of the beast) under the broader time span when they are supposed to occur.

3. Why do those holding the Reformed historical view say that the book of Revelation primarily points to the church in the past?

4. If time permits, you may want to take a closer look at one key premillennial teaching: the rapture. Begin by reading John Hagee’s description of the rapture (see quote at the end of this session guide). Then read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, the foundational passage in support of the rapture. What do we take this passage to refer to, if not to a rapture of believers prior to a great tribulation? And finally, read Andrew Kuyvenhoven’s comments (quote). What reason does he suggest for rejecting the rapture teaching? Do you find it convincing?

5. Are you comfortable with the idea of interpreting Revelation as a book of symbols and pictures rather than as a literal description? Why or why not?

6. The “Left Behind” or premillennial view is immensely popular with many Christians today. What do you think accounts for its appeal?

7. From what you’ve seen and heard so far, what value do you think the book of Revelation might have for Christians and the church today?

Revelation: To unveil or disclose. The book of Revelation is an unveiling or disclosure of Jesus Christ and his role in the past, present, and future.

Apocalypse: A revealing or unveiling or disclosing. Often mistakenly defined as having to do with cataclysmic, end-time events. Means the same as “revelation”; has sometimes been used as a subtitle of the book of Revelation.

Apocalyptic literature: A unique type of hyper-language found in such books as Daniel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, parts of the gospels, and especially Revelation. It features symbolism and vivid imagery and is not meant to be understood literally. For example, persons may be represented as animals; numbers may have special meanings; earthquakes and floods may represent historical events; and persons may have mysterious visions. The purpose of this type of writing is to open our eyes to what we might otherwise not see.

QUOTE

The Rapture

All over the earth the graves of those who have trusted Christ will explode as their occupants soar into the heavens to meet the Light of the World. . . . Cars will empty beside the interstate, their engines running, their drivers and occupants strangely missing. Supper dishes will steam in the homes of believers, food will boil on their stoves, but no one will remain to eat this earthly dinner, for all believers will be taking their place at the heavenly table for the marriage supper of the Lamb. The next day, headlines of local, national, and international newspapers will scream: “MILLIONS MISSING WITH NO EXPLANATION.” New Age devotees might explain the mass disappearance by insisting that a vast armada of UFOs have abducted millions of people. . . .

Telephone lines around the world will jam as families try to check on loved ones. And the churches of the world will be packed with weeping, hysterical people who see the truth too late and cry, “The Lord of Glory has come and we are left behind to go through the Tribulation and to face the coming Antichrist.”

—John Hagee in *Beginning of the End*, as quoted by Andrew Kuyvenhoven in *The Day of Christ’s Return*, pp. 59-60.

The Trouble with the Rapture

The most objectionable feature of the rapture teaching is the world flight by the church. When the real trouble begins (the great tribulation) the true Christians sail through the sky to the wedding banquet in heaven. . . . There is not even a hint in the Scriptures that the saints will silently slip out of this world. . . .

When Paul, in Romans 8:18-27, considers our present suffering in the light of future glory, he includes church and creation in both suffering and hope. And he ties them closely together. Church and world share suffering and hope. . . .

Suffering, or tribulation, is part of the Christian life. It is not incidental, but belongs to the way of salvation. . . . We have much more reason to believe that something strange is going on when the church has peace than when it is under fire.

—Andrew Kuyvenhoven in *The Day of Christ's Return*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, pp. 65-66, 76.

❖ FOR NEXT TIME

Please read Revelation 1-3 at home this week. This will make the video presentation easier to follow and more meaningful.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

To learn more about the book of Revelation and today's topic, you are invited to read this optional section at home this week. Unless otherwise indicated, the pieces in this section were written by Rev. Lew Vander Meer.

WHY THE TERM “REFORMED HISTORICAL”?

We are using the term “Reformed historical” to label the approach to the book of Revelation used in our study. This is a new term coined for this production.

So why “Reformed historical”?

Before explaining the meaning of “Reformed historical,” let’s look briefly at other ways to view Revelation:

- *Premillennial*: a view of time (and the book of Revelation) that says we are living “pre” (before) the millennium. The millennium is a thousand years of bliss and peace for God’s people, during which the church will be gathered, along with elements of the Jewish nation, to live with Christ. Before we reach this thousand years, two events must happen: first, believers will be raptured (taken up into the air); and second, a seven-year tribulation (time of intense suffering) will begin for all those nonbelievers left behind. The millennium begins at the conclusion of the tribulation.
- *Amillennial*: a view of time (and the book of Revelation) that says there is no literal thousand years of bliss awaiting us in the future. There is also no seven-year tribulation preceding this millennium. History is “simple”—Jesus will come again and immediately bring history to its end. Judgment and eternity—with or without Christ—will immediately follow.
- *Dispensationalism*: a view of history generally accepted and taught by pre-millennial thinkers. This view says that God has related to people differently in seven different, successive time periods. Each time period is basically unrelated to the one(s) before and after; and each new time period begins when the one before ends in failure because of people’s sin. We are now living in the sixth dispensation, that of grace or the church age, as we await the culmination of history, the millennium (see p.15 for a chart and explanation of each of the seven time periods of dispensationalism).
- *Preterist*: a view that sees the book of Revelation as only an account of what has already happened in the past, roughly A.D. 90 to A.D. 200. All the events and persons described in Revelation are past history; today the book is basically a curiosity, though it offers moral and spiritual values that apply to all people of all time.

- *Historicist*: a view that reads the book of Revelation as a concise and specific history of the church. We can find actual people and events of the church's history in the pages of Revelation. For example, Calvin and Luther saw the dragon (ch. 12) and the beasts (ch. 13) as personified in the Roman church and its leaders. Others might see the four horsemen (ch. 6) as bringing a specific war or set of wars such as the crusades.
- *Futurist*: a view that sees the book of Revelation almost exclusively in terms of the future (the premillennial view). The apostle John is describing events that are associated with Christ's second coming (the rapture, the tribulation, the mark of the beast, the millennium, the binding and releasing of Satan, judgment day, and so on). All or nearly all of the events described in Revelation have yet to happen.
- *Ethical/Moral*: a view that says the book of Revelation is a source of victorious themes to be applied to contemporary issues. The symbols and pictures of the book are symbolic of the suffering experienced today by individuals and groups (including poverty, subjection to dictators, class suppression, mental and emotional illness, abuse, and the like). The book's message of victory proclaims hope for all persons caught in the web of pain and bondage.

The term "Reformed historical" is used in our study of Revelation to refer to the amillennial view of Revelation, the view held by most if not all churches in the Reformed Calvinist tradition. This view of Revelation is sometimes called the "idealist" position, in that it represents symbolically the victory of good over evil. However, since that term could also suggest something that is not real and attainable, we coined the term "Reformed historical" for use in this course.

The "Reformed" part of "Reformed historical" identifies the source of this view of Revelation: Reformed/Presbyterian churches, conservative Lutherans, and other churches that trace their thinking back to the Reformation. The premillennial view of Revelation is usually found in Baptist, Pentecostal, and Nazarene churches, as well as in other groups that baptize only believers and do so by immersion.

The "historical" part of the title is used because this view of Revelation sees the book as spanning the full history of the church, from the first coming to the second coming. The book of Revelation primarily "looks back," seeing what John was about to see, "what must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1). Revelation focuses primarily on the past, but—like any good history lesson—also looks at the present and the future. This view says that Revelation is a symbolic record of the testing of the church throughout history, but it offers a clear message that the church has been (and will continue to be) victorious. God wins!

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PREMILLENNIALISM

(This material is based on Andrew Kuyvenhoven's *The Day of Christ's Return*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, pp. 45-50.)

Many may be surprised to learn that the form of "Left Behind" premillennialism we encounter today is relatively new. Yes, there are elements of premillennial thinking throughout history. But the content and style of such books as *The Late Great Planet Earth* and *Left Behind* had their beginnings in the 1800s. A number of interesting characters from the 1800s laid the groundwork for and/or created what we know as modern-day premillennialism:

- William Miller, a Baptist farmer from New York, predicted that Christ would return in 1843, basing his notion on Daniel 8:14. When nothing of the kind happened in 1843, Miller changed the date to October 22, 1844. Thousands of his followers, called Millerites, gave up their possessions and businesses and were left in poverty.
- Charles Taze Russell founded the organization that became known as the Jehovah's Witnesses in 1844. He predicted Christ would return in 1914. Later Witnesses set the date for 1925 and 1975.
- Margaret MacDonald, a young Christian living in Port Glasgow, Scotland, had a vision of believers being raptured before the second coming. Her ideas were published in 1840.
- John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), an Irish clergyman, is the father of premillennialism as we know it in North America today.
- Cyrus I. Scofield (1843-1921) picked up on Darby's views and produced a study Bible that featured notes on dispensationalism and premillennialism as taught by John Darby. His *Scofield Reference Bible*, King James Version, was published in 1909 and sold millions of copies. In 1989 his *Reference Bible* was printed with the New King James Version. It remains in wide use today as *the Bible* of the premillennial dispensationalists.

These people and their teachings laid the groundwork for the modern popularity of the premillennial view. Dallas Theological Seminary "supplies the theologians for the movement," but it is also spread through "Bible schools, prophecy conferences, paperbacks, and videotapes" (Kuyvenhoven). Possibly the greatest influence in the twentieth century was the book *The Late Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsey, published in the 1970s. This, of course, was followed by the extremely popular *Left Behind* series of books, movies, and study guides still widely used today.

DISPENSATIONALISM

One of the keys to understanding premillennial thinking is the dispensational perspective on history. There are two major Christian views of history: the covenantal and the dispensational.

The **covenant perspective** on history is rooted in the thinking of John Calvin and is a crucial part of Reformed thinking. It views all human history as being of one piece. God's promise (covenant) started at the beginning of time with Adam and Eve. They were, in a sense, the first "church." God's covenant (a promise of grace with the expectation of faith and obedience) was formalized and firmly established with Abraham in Genesis 17. This covenant was continued throughout the Old Testament with the Israelite people and then on into the New Testament with the post-Pentecost church. Even though many external elements and emphases changed as time went along, God consistently maintained a church throughout history rooted in the basic promise/faith/obedience pattern. We are one with the people of God in the Old Testament, now fulfilled in Christ, and continue to be the church until the second coming.

The **dispensational perspective** on history says that God attempted a variety of ways to relate to people throughout time. When one of those ways was foiled by the sin and rejection of God's people, God began a new way of relating to them. Each new way of relating ushered in a new section or "dispensation" of time/history. Each section or dispensation is unique and does not depend on the format of the previous and complete dispensation. So, for example, when Reformed people say that infant baptism replaces circumcision as a sign of God's covenant promise, the dispensational person is amazed. Circumcision is done! Finished! Baptism is new. Baptism is part of the new dispensation and is unique. Baptism is only for believers and must be done by immersion.

The Seven Dispensations

(These descriptions are from *What We Believe*, Leader's Guide, part 2, Faith Alive Christian Resources, p. 48.)

The seven dispensations, in simplified form, are as follows (also see chart on p. 15):

- First dispensation: **innocence/paradise**. Adam and Eve lived in a state of perfection or innocence. God said "Obey me and live forever." But they disobeyed and death entered the world.
- Second dispensation: **conscience**. Sin awakened human conscience. God said, "Follow your moral sense and obey me." Noah and his family did exactly that, but the rest of the world did not. As a result, God was forced to destroy the world with a flood.

- Third dispensation: **human government**. During this time, God related to people through authority figures and leaders. But, as indicated by the tower of Babel, the leaders disobeyed. And so God gave up his plan of world government and confused the people.
- Fourth dispensation: **promise/patriarchs**. God called Abraham and gave him many great promises. He began a great new nation of God's people called Israel. Under the leadership of Moses, God's people were led out of Egypt and slavery. But even great leaders weren't enough to convince them to obey God.
- Fifth dispensation: **law**. At Mount Sinai, God began a new way of relating to people through external laws and procedures. But once again, God's people didn't listen. They failed to keep God's law, and so they ended up in captivity in Babylon, though a remnant returned to rebuild Jerusalem. At the end of this dispensation, God sent Jesus to fulfill the law, but the people rejected him and killed him.
- Sixth dispensation: **grace/church age**. At Pentecost the Spirit descended and the Christian church began. God relates to people through their acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ. This is the dispensation in which we are living. It will end when Jesus returns.
- Seventh dispensation: **the kingdom/millennium**. The final dispensation will be Christ's thousand-year reign in Jerusalem on the throne of David. During this time of prosperity and peace, Jewish people will be given another chance to accept Christ. When this dispensation ends, eternity begins.

Again, we are now living in the sixth dispensation, the dispensation of grace or the church age. We are waiting for the final dispensation, the thousand years, the dispensation of the kingdom/millennium. So when a Reformed believer asks, "Why doesn't the end simply come when Jesus comes again—why all this extra business of rapture, tribulation, and millennium and then judgment day?" the premillennial believer, viewing time from the dispensational perspective, answers:

We are simply waiting for the final section or dispensation of time. This is how God works. As people have rejected God in all dispensations, so also now people are turning away from God. God will usher in the final period, the "kingdom," as a time to bring together all his own—Gentiles and Jews—to celebrate and live blissfully with him for these 1000 years.

While the differences between the Reformed and dispensational views are significant, they are *not* central to our salvation. One day, all believers will meet at Jesus' feet, whether or not we have come through a rapture and a tribulation.

DISPENSATIONAL VIEW OF HISTORY

