

DISCIPLE



UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE

The Writings • John • Revelation

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As You Continue DISCIPLE

You come to DISCIPLE: UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE having completed study of at least DISCIPLE: BECOMING DISCIPLES THROUGH BIBLE STUDY. Indeed you may have completed study of all three of the earlier phases of DISCIPLE. So you know the expectation in terms of time and discipline—thirty to forty-five minutes of daily reading and notetaking, reflecting and praying six days a week, and participation in a two-and-a-half-hour weekly group meeting for thirty-two weeks. The study manual format is familiar to you as well.

So you are not new to DISCIPLE, nor is DISCIPLE new to you. But you are *starting anew*. And in DISCIPLE that means you will read Scripture passages as if you are reading them for the first time, and the notes you take will come from that new perspective.

Reading Scripture Aloud

Each daily assignment in UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE calls for reading Scripture aloud. Choose a time and place for daily study where you will not disturb others as you read aloud and where you will feel comfortable—not self-conscious—and free to express yourself as you read. Poetry and symbolic language in this study’s Scripture appeal both to eye and ear. The amount of Scripture to be read daily varies from day to day and week to week, and the passages to be read aloud also vary in length daily and weekly. Maintain the discipline of daily study so you have time to prepare thoroughly and completely.

Study Manual Format

Two continuing sections in the study manual format have new titles: “Fruit From the Tree of Life” for the commentary section and “Marks of Faithful Community” for the discipleship section. Both sections usually are read on the sixth day of study, and both call for written responses.

Notice that “Marks of Faithful Community” does not include the word *the* before the word *faithful*. The message in this title is that faithful community is not an institution but a way of *being*. And the “Mark of Faithful Community” that appears in the margin beside this section always begins with the words “*Being faithful community, we. . .*” The content of “Marks of Faithful Community” is the response arrived at by viewing “Our Human Condition” through Scripture. These two sections always are to be considered together.

Two new elements in the study manual format rep-

resent special emphases in this study—“Psalm of the Week” and “The Radical Disciple.” “Psalm of the Week” provides occasion for living daily in the biblical text and is intended to lead participants into a deeper life of prayer using Psalms as a guide. The “Psalm of the Week” is to be prayed aloud daily during study, and weekly in the group session. Suggestions for experiencing the “Psalm of the Week” pay attention to feelings as well as words.

“The Radical Disciple” focuses on thoughts and actions relevant to the weekly theme that require stretch in terms of commitment to discipleship. The “Psalm of the Week” and “The Radical Disciple” sections belong within the context of faithful community. Whether praying the psalm or taking steps toward radical discipleship, participants know they are not alone—the community is there.

The brief prayer psalm, a familiar element in the study manual format, continues and functions as before. Always it comes from a psalm different from the “Psalm of the Week.”

“The Radical Disciple” section will not always appear in the same place in the study manual format. Its emphasis will determine where it is placed in each lesson. Content varies—sometimes calling for action, other times calling for reflection.

Scripture in the study manual comes mainly from the New Revised Standard Version, though occasionally other translations are quoted. Using a variety of translations for comparing verses and passages will enrich study because subtle differences in wording can bring a passage to life. Consider using *Tanakh*, a Jewish translation of Scripture, for a fresh version of the Writings. Daily reading assignments occasionally include the Apocrypha, so you will need a study Bible with the Apocrypha.

UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE Scripture

UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE concentrates on the Writings—Ruth, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, and Daniel. Torah, Prophets, and Writings make up the Hebrew Scriptures. Writings include all the books not in Torah or the Prophets.

New Testament Scriptures include the Gospel of John; 1, 2, 3 John; James; Jude; and Revelation.

Scripture in this study speaks to both heart and head and carries the reader toward the climax of the message and completion of the promise.

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UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE

Study Manual

The Writings • John • Revelation

APOCALYPSE

“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

27 Vision of End Time

OUR HUMAN CONDITION

The world has been here a long time, and it will continue for a long time. The world goes on. Life goes on. The end is nowhere in sight.

ASSIGNMENT

Stand up. Read The Revelation aloud. Why? Because John tells us to do so and promises a blessing (Revelation 1:3). Because the book is a vision, packed with imagery. Because reading it aloud in its entirety helps to keep the mystery and maintain the unity. Please obey and honor John. Read the book aloud.

- Day 1 Read aloud Revelation 1–3 (John’s vision, letters to the churches).
- Day 2 Read aloud Revelation 4–11 (vision of God, seven seals, seven angels with trumpets, two witnesses, the beast from the pit).
- Day 3 Read aloud Revelation 12–14 (the woman and the red dragon, two beasts, the Lamb, the redeemed).
- Day 4 Read aloud Revelation 15–18 (seven bowls of God’s wrath, the great whore and the beast, lament for fallen Babylon).
- Day 5 Read aloud Revelation 19–22 (praises in heaven, end of Satan and death, new heaven and new earth, the new Jerusalem, the river and the tree of life).
- Day 6 Read and respond to “Fruit From the Tree of Life” and “Marks of Faithful Community.”
- Day 7 Rest

PSALM OF THE WEEK

Follow each day’s reading aloud of assigned Scripture with praying aloud Psalm 2. Think about how the psalm addresses each day’s passages from Revelation.

PRAYER

Pray daily before study:

“You guide me with your instruction
and at the end you will receive me
with honor.

What else do I have in heaven but you?
Since I have you, what else could
I want on earth?” (Psalm 73:24-25, TEV)

Prayer concerns for this week:

APOCALYPSE

Day 1 Revelation 1–3 (John’s vision, letters to the churches)

Day 4 Revelation 15–18 (seven bowls of God’s wrath, the great whore and the beast, lament for fallen Babylon)

Day 2 Revelation 4–11 (vision of God, seven seals, seven angels with trumpets, two witnesses, the beast from the pit)

Day 5 Revelation 19–22 (praises in heaven, end of Satan and death, new heaven and new earth, the new Jerusalem, the river and the tree of life)

Day 3 Revelation 12–14 (the woman and the red dragon, two beasts, the Lamb, the redeemed)

Day 6 “Fruit From the Tree of Life” and “Marks of Faithful Community”

Fig Tree

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FRUIT FROM THE TREE OF LIFE

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day" (Revelation 1:10). John had his vision, heard the voice, saw Christ on Sunday. Resurrection morn. Perhaps it was "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark"—as when Mary Magdalene saw Jesus at the tomb (John 20:1). Perhaps John heard the waves splashing against the rocky shores of Patmos—as when Peter felt the waves on the Sea of Galilee and glimpsed the risen Christ "just after daybreak" (21:4-7).

Bible students are accustomed to prophets having visions. Ezekiel was "among the exiles by the river Chebar" when, in his words, "the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (Ezekiel 1:1). As Ezekiel saw wheels within wheels and eyes on the wheels, John saw a rider on a white horse followed by the armies of heaven (Revelation 19:11, 14). As Daniel, after fasting for three weeks, "saw a man clothed in linen" with "arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze" (Daniel 10:5-6), John saw "one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe, . . . his feet were like burnished bronze" (Revelation 1:13-15).

John was in exile on Patmos, a small rocky island in the Aegean Sea seventy-five miles off the coast from Ephesus. Surrounded by salt water, punished by a blazing sun, life on the island was harsh; and there was little chance of escape. What's more, the sea symbolized chaos and evil. No wonder John, when he pictured heaven, saw a place where "the sea was no more" (21:1).

John knew persecution: "I, John, your brother . . . share with you in Jesus the persecution." He was exiled on "Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Faithfulness to this Jesus placed John in prison and gave him his vision. Whether he was the apostle John or an elder we do not know. He simply identified himself as "John, your brother."

The Apocalypse

The book is called "Apocalypse," which means revelation; but it is a revelation of end time—tough to comprehend. Countless people have been and still are bewildered, even intimidated, by this book. The reasons are many. Visions, by their very nature, are sometimes difficult to explain. But also, the document was deliberately coded. Only insiders would know the meaning of numbers like 666 and 42, names like Babylon and Jezebel. In addition, the setting—first-century politics, economics, and religion—is foreign to the modern reader. On top of it all, some interpreters misuse the book to frighten or confuse, or to profit from the unsuspecting.

But the major barrier to understanding the Revelation is that it was written by an exile to an oppressed minority. Believers in Jesus were hanging on to their faith at the risk of their lives. True, some Christians in some parts of the world today understand, because they too are suffering for their Lord. But

NOTES, REFLECTIONS, AND QUESTIONS



During the reign of the emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96), when the book of Revelation was written, the Roman Empire extended west to east from the Atlantic Ocean to the Caspian Sea and included most of Europe in the north and the coastal lands of Africa and all Egypt in the south.

comfortable Christians in pleasant surroundings have difficulty comprehending the depth of pain or the darkness of despair experienced under the ever-present threat of persecution.

Late in the first century A.D., the Roman Empire took on a demonic character. The Flavian family—Vespasian, the father, and Titus and Domitian, the sons—used religious loyalty to their political advantage. With the Greek and Roman gods, people could ask their favor or not, could pick and choose their favorites. But when the emperors began to build temples honoring themselves, when the gods no longer were marble sculptures but carried the swords of the army, minted the coins of the realm, celebrated the festivals of the state, Jews and Christians were under great pressure to conform or to suffer. Some Christians were imprisoned, tortured, and killed when they refused to acknowledge emperors as gods. The persecution did not end with the Flavian emperors but continued into the second and third centuries A.D. Most scholars date John's Revelation to the reign of Domitian, perhaps A.D. 95 or 96.

A Sensory Experience

John knew the book would be read aloud, as were all New Testament writings. That practice was simply assumed, customary. John's letter, however, is different. The essence is in the hearing, in the feeling, in the seeing. John's Revelation is meant to be a sensory experience, not a closely reasoned argument. "Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of the prophecy" (Revelation 1:3, *italics added*).

Much of the Bible appeals to the intellect, to the mind. The laws of Moses, the teachings of Ecclesiastes, the admonitions of Proverbs cause us to think. But some parts of the Bible, like the Song of Solomon, the Psalms, the narratives of Ruth and Esther, cause us to feel. The Revelation is a mighty burst of sensory experience. We hear trumpets, see the four horsemen, smell the burning sulfur, listen to the heavenly chorus, taste the fruit from the tree of life, and sense the serenity of the river of the water of life.

The God of the Bible

We can't mistake where John stands theologically. He does not worship some strange imported god. His God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of Moses and the prophets; the One "who is and who was and who is to come" (Revelation 1:4). Almost every sentence of his writing is saturated with Old Testament themes and images. Of the 404 verses, 275 have some kind of Old Testament allusion. (Because John does not always quote Hebrew Scriptures word for word, but also alludes to them continually, he may have known them almost by heart.) Furthermore, John wants to make absolutely certain we know he has received his revelation from Jesus Christ, the Jesus Christ of Scripture. Watch as he establishes the central attributes of the Savior.

NOTES, REFLECTIONS, AND QUESTIONS

Roman Emperors

Augustus	27 B.C.–A.D. 14
Tiberius	14–37
Gaius (Caligula)	37–41
Claudius	41–54
Nero	54–68
Galba	68–69
Otho	69
Vitellius	69
Vespasian	69–79
Titus	79–81
Domitian	81–96
Nerva	96–98
Trajan	98–117
Hadrian	117–138

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NOTES, REFLECTIONS, AND QUESTIONS

“Grace to you and peace . . . from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:4-6); “faithful witness” (1 John 1:9; John 18:37); “first born of the dead” (Acts 26:23); “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Colossians 2:10); “who loves us” (John 14:21); “freed us from our sins” (Acts 13:39; Hebrews 7:27); “by his blood” (1 John 1:7); “made us to be a kingdom, priests” (1 Peter 2:9); “serving his God and Father” (Matthew 20:28).

John holds to traditional faith. His bizarre apocalypse comes from the God of the Bible, the God of the prophets, the God of Ezekiel and Daniel; from the same Jesus Christ of the New Testament witness. Revelation brings to completion the biblical message of redemption.

Prophetic and Apocalyptic Contrasted

As interpreters of Scripture, we are learning to distinguish the prophetic from the apocalyptic. The prophetic handles real time and space. Jeremiah knew, like fire in his bones, that if the people did not repent and turn wholeheartedly to righteousness and compassion, punishment would come (Jeremiah 5:1, 29). Such is the nature of prophecy—prophets understand today and speak about tomorrow.

But apocalyptic writers “see” beyond tomorrow, beyond specific days and years into a reality not confined by geography or calendar. Apocalyptic visions contain truths bigger than our mental categories can contain. They discern spiritual reality outside of time and space.

Ezekiel, filled with a heavenly vision, started with prophecy, announcing that Zion would be restored, exiles would return, and the Temple would be rebuilt. But then his vision became apocalyptic. The Temple grew, large enough to hold the faithful from all the nations of the earth (Ezekiel 40-42).

Daniel read the words on the wall—“MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN” (Daniel 5:25)—and knew the kingdom of Babylon was tottering. He wrote about the painful persecution under the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks. But then, he too became apocalyptic. While he was describing the beasts, he suddenly saw an Ancient One take his throne,

“his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool” (7:9).

He foresaw a new kingdom, a final victorious kingdom. He saw “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven” (7:13, NIV). Warfare turned from earth to the heavenly realm. Even Daniel said, “I heard but could not understand” (12:8). Apocalypse deals with end time, last things, new creation breaking in upon us. We use our imaginations. We search for the overarching meaning. Apocalypse is not the same as prophecy, for it is even more real, more profound, more absolute. Those who treat apocalypse as if it were prophecy take dates and places literally, which means the symbolism is often misunderstood—and therefore the message in the symbolism is missed.

The Seven Churches

Because the churches are *seven*—seven meaning complete—and because the churches formed a geographical circle, they symbolize all Christian communities everywhere. The apocalyptic message is clear: Jesus Christ knows his people, intimately, thoroughly, better than they know themselves.

So John wrote down his Lord's day vision as a letter to seven churches, the seven lampstands. Under the authority of One who is "the first and the last," he wrote to them and to us the message he received (Revelation 1:20).

MARKS OF FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

We allow John's Revelation to jar us out of our complacency. We want to be fervent Christians. We want to live each day expectantly, eager to receive Christ's kingdom, doing the work of Christ so as to be ready, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Knowing your time is limited, how can you be more intentional about being ready?

The world would have us believe we can live as the world lives and be ready for the next world. How are Christians tempted in small ways to live by the world's thinking?

What are the risks for the church and for Christians in taking a stand against the prevailing culture?

THE RADICAL DISCIPLE

While society in general thinks culture—behavior patterns, beliefs, arts, entertainment, products—is benign, the radical disciple resists the power of everyday culture, knowing it undermines the sovereignty of God.

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE

Rome and its emperors are integral to the context and message of John's Revelation. Research Roman emperors from Augustus to Hadrian (see list, study manual page 211), giving particular attention to their attitudes toward Jews and Christians, and report briefly (two to three minutes) in the weekly group meeting.

NOTES, REFLECTIONS, AND QUESTIONS

Being faithful community, we live and work in the present, expecting God's victory in the future, secure in knowing the end—whenever it comes—is in God's hands.

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UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE

Teacher Helps

The Writings • John • Revelation

27 Vision of End Time

Reminder: See teacher helps page 12 for ordering the *DISCIPLE: UNDER THE TREE OF LIFE Revelation Video Letter* for Session 31.

GATHERING AND PRAYER

(5 minutes)

VIDEO SEGMENT 27

(30 minutes)

Presenter: M. Eugene Boring

Scripture: Marquis Laughlin

Prepare to View Video

Two competing claims faced the Christians addressed by Revelation: The claim of the one God and the claim of emperor worship. Listen for the tension in those claims.

View Video

Summary of video content:

Revelation emphasizes faith in the one God who makes exclusive claims.

Domitian, the Roman emperor, insisted on being addressed as “our Lord and God the emperor.”

Many Christians saw the demand for emperor worship as a harmless ritual to which they could adjust without compromising their faith.

Discuss After Viewing Video

Describe the situation created for Christians by the claims of their God and the claims of their government and culture. What claims of our culture tempt us to compromise our obedience to God?

SCRIPTURE AND STUDY MANUAL

(45 minutes adults) (30 minutes youth)

Form three groups to look for the big picture in Revelation. Group 1—Days 1 and 3; Group 2—Day 2; Group 3—Days 4 and 5. Work through each day’s Scripture and notes to identify and list—without interpreting or explaining—images, pictures, and symbolic language. Consider the list and discuss these questions: What big picture emerges from these details? What is the overarching message?

In the total group recall the difference between *prophetic* and *apocalyptic* from study manual page 212. Then study Old Testament examples of apocalyptic writing with themes similar to those in Revelation. Work in three groups: Group 1—Isaiah

24–27; Group 2—Ezekiel 38–39; Group 3—Daniel 7–12. Scan the passages looking for such themes as heavenly signs, judgment, signs pointing to end time, the final victory of God’s people. Discuss this question: How do these themes and images convey the message that God is in control of history?

Revelation repeatedly pictures the struggle of the church and its eventual victory over the world. Form pairs or threes and assign one passage to each: Revelation 1:9–5:14; 6–11; 12–16; 17:1–22:5. Scan assigned passages with these questions in mind: Where and how is the church’s struggle pictured? What is John saying to the church? What promises of victory over the world does John give the church? Hear from each group.

Hear any “If You Want to Know More” reports.

BREAK

(10 minutes)

ENCOUNTER THE WORD

(35 minutes adults) (15 minutes youth)

Scripture selection: Revelation 4

Hear Revelation 4 read aloud with eyes closed. Then read the passage silently, listing sounds, smells, sights, touches, tastes. Talk through the passage and lists with a partner and then with another pair. Discuss this question: What insights did you get from reading Scripture this way? Sing “Holy, Holy, Holy.” (See using all the senses in Bible study, pages 57–61 of *Teaching the Bible to Adults and Youth*.)

MARKS OF FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

(20 minutes)

Being faithful community, we live and work in the present, expecting God’s victory in the future, secure in knowing the end—whenever it comes—is in God’s hands.

Read “Our Human Condition.” In fours compare the views of life expressed there and in written responses to the first question in this section. Read the mark of faithful community. In discussing the last two questions, consider “The Radical Disciple” statement.

CLOSING AND PRAYER

(5 minutes adults) (10 minutes youth)

Turn to Lesson 28 and check assignments. Write down prayer concerns. Close by praying Psalm 2.