



by Sue Edwards

Revelation

Discovering Life for Today and Eternity



LEADER'S GUIDE

Revelation: Discovering Life for Today and Eternity
Leader's Guide
©2013 Sue Edwards

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Before You Begin . . .

Women request that I teach or write a study on Revelation more than any other book in the Bible. I have been hesitant because of the disagreements on how to interpret the book and because it contains so much figurative language that a self-study can be difficult without excessive direction. However, the approach in this study guide, first digging deep into the introductory chapter, then examining the seven churches for practical lessons, and finally studying the last two chapters for a full picture of the new heavens and the new earth, bypasses many of those issues.

Women usually approach Revelation with tremendous excitement but by the middle of the book, some lose interest, lost in the imagery of battles, bloodshed, and beasts. Focusing on the first and last portions of the book flows well and keeps them engaged, because it all pertains to them.

However, skipping the middle portion of Revelation does not mean that chapters 4 through 20 are unimportant. They are crucial to our understanding God's final work on the earth as we know it. But, in my opinion, these chapters are best learned when taught by expert teachers or scholars. Between lessons 8 and lesson 9, consider scheduling a couple extra study sessions. Check with your local church or denomination to recruit local scholars or a panel of experts to teach these chapters in person. If they are not available, I hope to provide expert resources on the website (www.discovertogetherseries.com) that you can download and view, based on availability. Be sure to ask your students to read chapters 4 through 20 in conjunction with these teaching times. A combination of expert teaching and small group discussion should give your students a thorough understanding of the book of Revelation. (For further research into Revelation, see the resources listed below.)

No other book besides Revelation actually promises blessings to those who read it and more to those who heed what they hear.

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (Revelation 1:3)

The reason for the blessing: *because the time is near.*

Thus, the days we live in make this study timely. I do not know whether or not we are living in the end times, but I do see an acceleration of natural disasters, economic woes, and global chaos, possible precursors to God's culmination of the earth's history. And because



REVELATION: *Discovering Life for Today and Eternity*—Leader’s Guide

each of us is given only a limited number of years on this earth, unless Jesus returns first, the time is near for all of us. But he may return soon.

Almost every time I turn on my television, I hear reports of some fresh crisis. Changes are upon us faster than we can adjust. In this quick-paced, quicksand world, women need hope and secure footing. They need to know that God has not abandoned them, that he still loves them, and that he is still in control. They also need to free themselves from addictions and distractions that sidetrack them from whole-hearted commitment to Jesus. The study of Revelation provides exciting promises, encouragement, and challenges to help us live wisely in this crazy world.

This study guide provides the right mix of asking questions to help women discover truth on their own and sound direction when they need help. Recruit a group of women to join you and get ready for a life-changing ride.

You’ll want to acquaint yourself and your students with the resources available to enhance your study experience:

- *Videos.* Supplemental teaching videos of various lengths are available for individual or group use at www.discovertogetherseries.com. For quick access with your smart phone or other handheld device, QR codes within each lesson correspond to these videos. These videos contain personal testimonies, related stories, and historical background. The introductory video can be used in your initial gathering to excite and inform your students as they embark on this adventure together.
- *Digging Deeper.* Some women will want to work the optional Digging Deeper questions located in the margins of the study guide. Determine with your group how you want to use these study prompts. You may want to include them in your discussion, use them at the end if time allows, or simply suggest that women who want to spend more time in deeper study work on these on their own. If a particular woman shows an aptitude for Scripture study, you may want to ask her to tackle a particular Digging Deeper question and report her findings in the next session. Then ask if any other women also worked on that particular Digging Deeper, widening the discussion if possible.
- *Quotes, Background Info, and Extras.* Soak up the inspiring sidebars that relate to particular parts of each lesson. If any especially resonates with you, use it as a springboard for discussion or personal application.

In addition, there is a “Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders” available at www.discovertogetherseries.com.

END TIMES VIEW OF THE AUTHOR

I’m a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary and our school holds a premillennial, pretribulation view of the end times. This means I attempt to interpret the Bible in the way I believe the original author meant it for the original audience. Then, when appropriate, I attempt to translate what that would mean for us today. If I think the original author meant the text to be taken literally, then I take it literally. When I think the author was using figurative language, painting a picture or using an image to make his point, I take it figuratively.

I believe that Jesus will actually return to usher in a thousand-year kingdom on the earth before Christians enter into their eternal home, the new heavens and the new earth, according to Revelation 20–22. And, for reasons I will explain in lesson 7, I believe Christians will be spared the Great Tribulation, the outpouring of God’s wrath on the earth described in the middle of the book. The verse we will explore, and others, is Revelation 3:10 where Jesus says, *Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

Although this study is written from that perspective, I think you will enjoy the study even if you hold a different view. Godly scholars differ on what is figurative and what is literal, the timing of these events, who will be where, and other issues. I doubt anyone has all of it correct. Approach the study with an irenic attitude, as I have tried to do, especially if women in the group hold varying perspectives. We can agree on most of what is covered in this study, regardless of our end times views. The first eight lessons focus on the Exalted Christ and his letters to the seven churches. These lessons are intensely practical, and should not cause dissension. If differences surface, it will probably be in the last lesson, where you will need to create an atmosphere conducive to a respectful and honest exchange of ideas, regardless of preconceived or differing views. I have written the study in a way that allows for diversity of opinions, and the chapters I have chosen to study lend themselves to that outcome. Too often, Revelation is neglected because of differences, and we miss incredible blessings as a result. Don’t let that possibility scare you away from leading a group through one of the most beautiful and important books of the Bible.

A SAFE SPACE

Creating an open protected place for the women to discuss the lessons will be especially important in a study where there may be different approaches to the text. We need spaces where we can be brutally honest and open, even when our ideas differ from others or are not even *Christian*.

Allow for different views by listening respectfully to each woman’s contributions

whether you agree or not. Often when women articulate their ideas, they are processing verbally, evaluating their thoughts as they speak. Many women need the freedom to express their roadblocks to faith in a safe environment before they can find answers to questions that hinder them from trusting or following God wholeheartedly.

If you, as the leader, disagree with an answer, ask other women to express their ideas, particularly women that are likely to have thought through their answers more carefully or see through a biblical lens. Let the women *kick around* these ideas and give the Holy Spirit time to work in the women’s lives as they wrestle with concepts that may be difficult for them to understand or accept. If you believe women’s answers are wrong, unorthodox, or dangerous, see the “Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders” for instructions on what to do. But remember that you as the leader are key in creating a safe place for discussion.

As you guide the group with skill and a caring heart, women may actually change the way they think, feel, and act, especially related to their personal relationship with God. What a privilege!

PURPOSE AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

People today are often weak in Christology; they have an insufficient view of the Exalted Christ. They see him as their buddy, their friend; and indeed he is their friend, but so much more. One woman described Jesus like a comb in her pocket that she could take out any time she was in trouble, almost like a lucky rabbit’s foot. These distortions come from an overemphasis on Jesus’ humanity and love without balancing those with his majesty, power, sovereignty, and discipline. Understanding the strong and holy side of Jesus helps women trust him to right injustice and, one day, to create a new universe without sin. Jesus is Almighty God, a member of the Holy Trinity, and when we see him that way, we can rest in him. He is Someone we can depend on for our present and our future. The first lesson, on Revelation 1, shows us the Exalted Christ, the Jesus who is coming back for us, and seeing him this way serves to correct typical distortions.

In Revelation 2–3, the apostle John recorded seven letters from the Exalted Christ to ancient churches in Asia Minor near the end of the first century. Did you get that?! Jesus wrote letters evaluating those churches! A cursory reading, skimming over them as I have done numerous times, doesn’t yield nearly the fruit of a deep plunge. I was overwhelmed, almost overcome, by the richness and beauty of each letter, and my prayer is for you to experience the same benefit.

Jesus specifically targeted each letter to the city, the congregation, and the individuals where it was sent. But the reality is, churches and the individuals in them have not changed all that much through the ages. These letters are timeless in their ability

REVELATION: *Discovering Life for Today and Eternity*—Leader's Guide

to encourage, enhance, and correct. As we see what particular issues each group struggled with, we will see that mirrored in our churches today. When I skimmed over these letters, I missed these valuable insights, but going deep has changed my view of Jesus and my commitment to him.

The first lesson shows us the Exalted Jesus and the last lesson shows him ushering us into eternity. Indescribable! The pictures and promises in the last two chapters of the Bible are breathtaking. Women who need a reason to hang on will find it in lesson 9. Women who are inconsistent, complacent, and sidetracked in their faith will find a reason to get serious!

How to Use This Leader's Guide

As you invite other women to join you, familiarize yourself with this overview. Then, as you work your way through the study, read the week-by-week leader's guide. I have included discussion topics particular to that lesson, trouble-shooting tips, activity ideas, and other pertinent information and counsel to aid in a productive group experience.

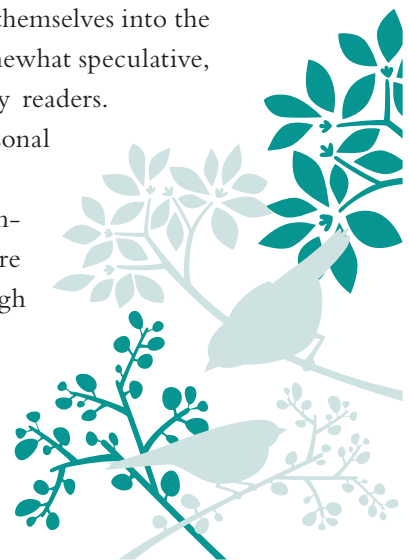
If you are new at leading a small group, be sure to digest the "Training Guide for Small-Group Leaders" before your first gathering. Even if you have led groups before, consider reviewing the instructions and tips in the Training Guide. Skilled leaders enhance the likelihood that a group will bond and thrive, but a poor leader usually stifles healthy interaction. If you encounter particular challenges in your group, refer back to the Training Guide for help.

If you do not have enough time to discuss all the questions in a particular lesson, first eliminate the supplemental digging deeper questions. If you still feel rushed or run out of time, move quickly through the observation questions, questions that can be answered directly from the text. These questions need to be asked to ensure sound interpretation but they are not always interesting in a discussion. For continuity, answer the questions yourself or let a group member answer quickly and then move on. If you still need more time, eliminate particular questions, or blocks of questions, that you do not feel are as helpful in or necessary to the discussion. Try not to destroy the flow of ideas by the questions you cut.

WHAT IS INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY?

Each lesson walks you verse by verse through a passage. Observation, interpretation, application, correlation, opinion, and share questions flow, guiding you through the text to help you grasp God's intended meaning and apply it to life today. This methodical approach is based on sound interpretive principles designed to reduce error and speculation. However, occasionally women will be asked to place themselves into the setting or the shoes of participants, but this exercise, although somewhat speculative, helps the passage come alive in the mind's eye of contemporary readers. Opinion and share questions aid in application to current and personal issues.

The goal is more than head knowledge—it's life change. Authentic growth includes new convictions and attitudes. The lessons are designed to move the student from head to heart to hand. Although



each lesson is grounded in Revelation, occasionally we will study other related passages to complement the Revelation text.

My goal in this Leader's Guide is not to overwhelm you with massive amounts of information but instead to give you concise answers that will help you guide your group through any rough spots. It also provides additional quality resources for further study on your own.

WILL YOU END WITH A WRAP-UP MESSAGE?

Leading small groups and teaching are different skills. When you wear your small-group leader's hat, you do not lecture! But you may want to end your time by putting on a teacher's hat. Participants often enjoy hearing a message to crystallize biblical truth.

Your wrap-up might be a ten-minute informal presentation, allowing for interaction and questions, or a forty-five-minute formal lecture, more like a pastor's Sunday message. If your study consists of several small groups, you may prefer a formal lecture. If you're meeting in a home, your group may prefer a more interactive lecture format. Use what works for you and your group.

If you believe that God may want you to teach the Bible, step out and try. Women love to hear their own leaders teach them rather than hear virtual teachers on DVD. Resources to sharpen your teaching skills are listed below. At first, your skills may not be as honed as more experienced teachers, but in time and with practice you should improve. And you have advantages over a virtual teacher. Women need models they can watch, hug, and talk to. And when one of their own steps out and is used by God, it inspires everyone to step forward and use their gifts, too. So, if something in you says, "teach!"—then go for it!

ENLIST WOMEN TO TEACH WITH YOU

Other women have something to say that would benefit the group. Listen attentively when they tell how God works in their lives. Identify women who inspire others. Who holds a high view of the Bible and has spent time studying? Who walks close to Jesus? Who lives wisely? Who is articulate? Passionate? Growing? Mature? Organized in her thinking?

If you add a teaching element to your Bible study format, consider asking one of these women to share a short testimony or deliver the message for the entire group that week. She will need a cooperative attitude. When you give a woman the platform you give her influence. I've worked with a few women who took advantage of this opportunity. They spoke twice as long as time allotted. Or they refused to prepare,

wandering aimlessly. Or they became so emotional that they broke down, upsetting women in the study.

To alleviate these problems, set a time limit and ask women to write out what they will say. Insist they review their message with you. Stress that if they’re a “time hog,” group time will be shorter, irritating participants. Use wisdom as you select women presenters, but consider how much women will benefit by hearing a variety of voices.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU TEACH WITH ACCURACY AND SKILL

- Mathews, Alice P. *Preaching That Speaks to Women*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.
- Robinson, Haddon. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001. (See also www.christiancourses.com for an online course.)
- Stanley, Andy and Lane Jones. *Communicating for a Change*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2006.
- Stott, John. *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982.
- Willhite, Keith, and Scott Gibson, eds. *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU STUDY THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- Hitchcock, Mark, *The End: A Complete Overview of Bible Prophecy and the End of Days*, Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012.
- Keener, Craig S. *Revelation*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.
- Osborne, Grant R. *Revelation*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.
- Pentecost, J. Dwight. *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958.
- Walvoord, John and Roy Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition*. Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1983.
- Wilcock, Michael. *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU STUDY THE PERSON OF JESUS

- Pentecost, J. Dwight. *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Life of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.
- Lucado, Max. *No Wonder They Call Him Savior*. Portland: Multnomah, 1986.
- Lucado, Max. *God Came Near*. Portland: Multnomah, 1987.
- Strobel, Lee. *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.
- Yancey, Philip. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU STUDY THE *BEMA* (WHERE GOD DISTRIBUTES REWARDS TO BELIEVERS)

- Dillow, Joseph C. *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man*. Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing, 1992.
- Lutzer, Erwin W. *Your Eternal Reward: Triumph and Tears at the Judgment Seat of Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1998.
- Stevenson, Tim. *The BEMA: A Story About the Judgment Seat of Christ*. Gainesville, TX: Fair Havens, 2000.

LESSON 1

A Preface and a Portrait: Revelation 1

PRAY AND SET GROUND RULES

Open with prayer. Should you pray or invite one of the participants to do so? Be sensitive to the women. If they're comfortable praying out loud, give them opportunity. If not, you, as the leader, pray.

Look over the study guide with your group and express your excitement about the topic. Discuss ground rules. Are there any off-limits topics—like politics or criticism of other churches—that you want to mention? Do you want to discourage women from bringing their children? Do you want to ask the participants to be respectful of views that differ from their own? Do you want to impress upon them the seriousness of confidentiality. You may want to write out a set of guidelines, hand them out, and discuss them the first time you meet. If women join later, remember to orient them.

Some women come to Bible study for the sole purpose of studying Scripture. Others come for community, to find friends. Regardless of your own bent, honor both desires. We all need a relationship with God through serious Bible study *and* we all need relationships through connecting in authentic community. Be sure the schedule reflects time for both.

GET ACQUAINTED

At your first gathering, spend some time getting to know one another. You might, for example, ask each woman to introduce herself by telling something about family, hobbies, what she likes to do on a Saturday night, a pet peeve, or what she hopes to gain from the study. If time allows, spend your first meeting connecting with questions or ice breaker games.

For an extended community builder, ask the group the first thing that pops into their heads when they hear the word “heaven.” Consider television advertisements, films about heaven, and creative stories based on speculation. After a time of fun and exploration, read and discuss the introductory section of your study guide, “Why Study Revelation?” You may want to paraphrase portions of the introduction or even add your own thoughts and experiences.



DISCUSS LESSON 1

Did you ask the women to come prepared to discuss the first lesson? If so, dive in. Briefly set the scene, give the women pertinent information, and then ask the first question.

LESSON CONTENT

Lesson 1, covering chapter 1, lays the foundation for understanding the book including the letters to the seven churches. The authors are identified, and, yes, there is more than one. This book was coauthored by the Godhead and by the apostle John, who served as scribe as well as author. John passed the letters on to seven specific churches. He was the privileged witness to a series of incredible visions that he attempted to describe. He heard direct words of the Exalted Christ, commendations and rebukes that he wrote down on a scroll. All churches throughout history benefit because the seven churches depict challenges faced by churches through the ages.

The picture of Jesus in his exalted form is breathtaking (1:12–16). After studying this passage, women should never again think of Christ as a “comb in their pocket.” I hope their Christology is elevated as a result of studying lesson 1.

Jesus explains the structure of the book in 1:19: “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.” Chapter 1 depicts what John has seen, chapters 2 and 3 depict what is now from John’s perspective, and chapters 4 through 22 depict what will take place later.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Question 1 helps students see the transfer of the book’s content from God the Father to Jesus Christ, the Son, to the guardian angel of each church, and then to John who writes to the specific church. If some women see the order a bit differently, let it go. Scholars disagree as to the identity of the messenger. Some say this is the guardian angel of each church and others believe the messenger is the human pastor who shepherds the flock. The point is that the Exalted Christ ultimately communicates via the letter to the church through John. But the Trinity has a hand in writing the book as well. It’s a book full of mystery. Accept this reality and don’t waste time arguing.

Question 2 relates to time. Since two thousand years has passed, in what sense will these things “soon” take place for the original audience? And if Jesus does not return for some time, in what sense will these things “soon” take place for us? In the sense that we are each given a limited time on this earth and then we die. Once we leave our mortal bodies, time changes for us, and these things then occur *soon* from our new perspective.

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Questions 7 through 9 cover verses 4–8, showing us a picture of the Trinity. The Father sits on the throne and the Holy Spirit is depicted by the term *the seven spirits*. The number seven is often used in the Bible as a number that represents wholeness or completeness. Revelation is jam-packed with symbolism and figurative language like this. The third person of the Trinity, Jesus, the Son, is “the firstborn from the dead . . . who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.” Verse 7 refers to his Second Coming. The important concept to draw out in this section is that the entire Trinity is involved in the writing of Revelation.

Recently, I was teaching a women’s Bible study at my church, and a woman pulled me aside afterward. She expressed that she found end times concepts in the Bible hard to believe. She had been a Christian for almost ten years, and was growing in her faith, but struggled to believe that God communicated to people with supernatural visions, and especially the idea that God would remake the whole world. I assured her that others share her struggle. I asked if she believed that God created the heavens and earth we occupy now, and she nodded yes. Then I asked her if, since God had created one realm of existence, it might be possible for him to create another realm of existence? Her eyes lit up with understanding.

Question 11 opens the door for women to express their struggles and skepticism concerning end times events, prophecies, and mysteries. Let them voice these feelings and do not try to persuade them otherwise. Let other women in the group share how they came to accept these sometimes difficult ideas. Eschatology, the study of end times, was the last course I took in seminary for that very reason. Be patient with the group and encourage them to approach their lesson with an attitude of learning more. Pray and ask God to help everyone understand and enjoy the truths presented in Revelation.

Question 21 asks the women if they believe that the world as we know it will end soon. The women will probably have different opinions. Let them express their various views, but refer back to Matthew 24:36 in the introduction if any are prone to be dogmatic or set specific dates.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Find paintings or pictures of modern day or ancient Patmos, the Aegean island off the coast of Turkey where John wrote Revelation. If women bring smart phones, tablets, or laptops to class, consider letting them find pictures and information about Patmos and then report on what they find during the discussion. The cave where John wrote Revelation can be visited today. Try to imagine what John’s life would have been like there and discuss the maps, pictures, paintings, or information you discover.

REVELATION: *Discovering Life for Today and Eternity*—Leader's Guide

- If artistic women create an interesting depiction of the Exalted Christ in response to question 17, discuss and showcase their work.
- Create a way to display depictions of rewards for the seven churches as you go through the letters. For example, you might create a bulletin board which you would display every week. For this lesson, display a tree on the board representing the tree of life. Later, use this board to review previous lessons. Draw the students' attention to the growing number of rewards as you progress through the series as an encouragement to be overcomers. Enlist a group of creative women to oversee this project.

LESSON 2

Ephesus: The Church Who Lost Her Love

LESSON CONTENT

In lesson two, women study the first of seven letters from the Exalted Christ—one to the church where John was bishop before his exile on Patmos. The pattern set in this lesson will be generally repeated in the next seven lessons, according to the structure laid out in the introductory section of each lesson. The structure of each letter is similar, but not identical, as Jesus includes various elements to fit the particular audience. In every letter, Jesus identifies himself with several descriptive words, most from chapter 1. In every letter, rewards are mentioned, again often related to the particular church he addresses. The admonition, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,” is included at or near the end of each letter.

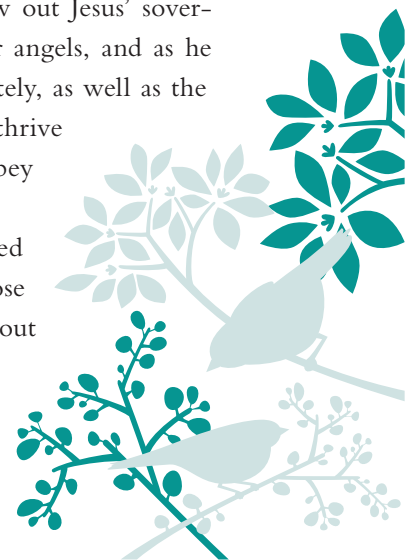
I researched the seven churches and included this background information in introductory text for lessons two through eight. Jesus intimately knew each church and the city where she resided. I discovered that the city where each church was located highly influenced that church.

The Ephesian church was prominent, sound, and well-respected, but Jesus was extremely disappointed in her because, although orthodox, she had lost the essential ingredient of love. As a result, her orthodoxy came off as rule-driven, tight, harsh, and cold. This flaw was so serious that Jesus threatened to remove her lamp stand, which meant death to the church.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Question 2 asks the significance of Jesus holding the seven angels and walking among the seven lampstands, which represent the seven churches. Draw out Jesus’ sovereignty and power as he holds the seven stars, the messengers or angels, and as he walks among the seven churches. He knows each church intimately, as well as the individuals that make up each congregation. Some churches will thrive and some will die, depending on whether or not they hear and obey Jesus’ words in the letters.

Questions 5–8 explore the essentials of sound doctrine needed to be orthodox but also asks the women to distinguish between those key elements and gray areas where disagreement is possible without



compromising sound doctrine. In question 6, in my opinion, the essentials of the faith include assenting to biblical inerrancy, the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Christ, the spiritual lostness of the human race, the substitutionary and bodily atonement of Christ, salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, and the physical return of Christ. These are the essential elements that make us Christian. Other issues should not destroy fellowship between Christians or cause conflict in the church.

If women decide that the place where they worship is no longer orthodox and are determined to confront the leadership, guide them to do so according to Matthew 18:15–17 and in a spirit of humility and grace. (This issue is raised again in lesson 4, question 17.)

Question 9 digs into the importance of love and questions 10–14 explore Matthew 22:37–40, known as the Great Commandment. Women are asked to distinguish between loving God with all their hearts, versus souls, versus minds. Scholars differ on these distinctions but generally the heart is thought to be the seat of the emotions, the soul is the spiritual part of a person, and the mind is the intellect. Answers will probably differ and that is fine. The important take-away is that we are called to love God with our whole self, and to love people well too.

The last Digging Deeper on page 30 asks why love is greater than faith or hope. The answer, in light of an end times study, is that in eternity, Christians will no longer need faith or hope, because all they hoped for and believed in will have been fulfilled. But they will continue to love, as love remains forever.

In this letter, and all that follow, Jesus uses the word *overcomer* or *victorious* to describe obedient believers who will receive the rewards he promises in the letters. Christian leaders disagree as to whether all Christians are overcomers or not. I believe that in the normal Christian life, believers make spiritual progress, and thus overcome much sin in their lives. They are overcomers. However, I also believe that Christians can succumb to sin and become carnal, disappointing God and others. The result is discipline, ultimate misery, ruptured fellowship with God and others, and loss of eternal rewards at the *bema* seat. These are the rewards Jesus alludes to in his letters and to lose these rewards is extremely serious. But I do not believe Christians can lose their salvation.

The Digging Deeper question on page 35 asks the women to differentiate between the great white throne judgment and the *bema*. The first is for those who have not accepted Christ as their Savior and as a result his blood does not cover their sin. The second judgment is for Christians only and will result in rewards, the kinds of rewards Christ reveals in his letters. In the introductory section of this Leader's Guide, I listed several resources for more insight into the *bema*.

LESSON 3

Smyrna: The Church Who Suffered Well

LESSON CONTENT

Two themes permeate Jesus' letter to Smyrna: suffering well and ultimate resurrection. The church was smaller and less influential than the church at Ephesus, but today it still exists, while Ephesus lies in ruins.

TROUBLESHOOTING

In this lesson, and also lesson 7 related to the church in Philadelphia, we see the phrase *synagogue of Satan* (2:9; 3:9). In both lessons, guide the discussion so that it does not deteriorate into an anti-Semitic bash. In each situation Jews are persecuting Christians, and Jesus implies that Satan is behind the animosity initiated by the Jewish community in the respective city. Jesus never encourages hateful rhetoric or behavior. In Matthew 5:43–48, he instructs his followers, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The note in the lesson (page 44) should help you in this regard.

The words Jesus used to describe himself in 2:8 and the reward of the crown of life point to the theme of resurrection. Jesus suffered but overcame the grave and was raised to new life, just as the church in Smyrna experienced. The lesson should encourage women as they live in a fallen world with its afflictions and injustices. The goal of the lesson is to see suffering from a biblical perspective, and to learn to make it holy, meaningful, and redemptive.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Use the image of a crown to remind women of Jesus' rewards when they suffer well. Make a bookmark or a picture with a meaningful verse and/or a visual of a crown.
- Find a visual method to help women give Jesus their fears and burdens. For example, ask the women to write their greatest fear or burden on black paper with a black pen. Then nail the paper to a cross and use it as a visual reminder throughout the study.
- Display a crown on your rewards board.



LESSON 4

Pergamum: The Steadfast Church in the Midst of Evil

LESSON CONTENT

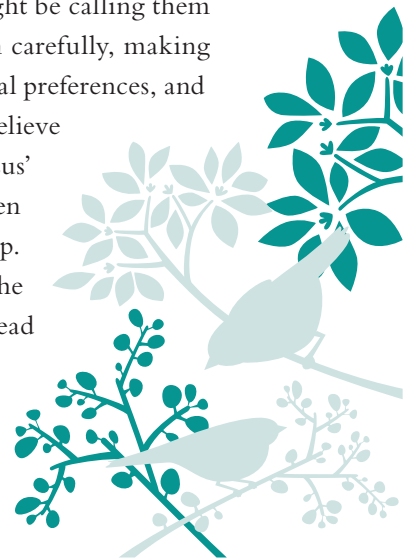
Lesson 4 focuses on the flaw in Pergamum: tolerating false teaching in their midst. This resulted in compromised moral standards and doctrine. Believers were enticed to sin by their involvement in the pagan culture. Facilitate a discussion to help women find balance between too much involvement in the culture versus knowing enough about the culture to influence it. We continue to face this dilemma today.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Students will probably express different views related to a Christian's connection with culture. Typically mothers fear the impact of culture on their children and some tend to withdraw to protect them. Other women exhibit a more lackadaisical attitude that may open them up to unhealthy influences. If you know that women hold different views on this subject, begin by asking them to discuss this topic graciously and respectfully. Draw out wise women on these topics. Wisdom will counter extremes that lead to foolishness and poor decisions.

Question 11 is preceded by a note explaining references to a rather involved Old Testament account of Balaam and Balak in Numbers 22–25. In his letter, Jesus related this story to the events in Pergamum. The main point of the story as it relates to this lesson is found in Numbers 31:16: “These were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the Lord in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the Lord’s people.” In that one verse you find the core information that you need to understand Jesus’ letter to Pergamum and answer the questions.

Question 17 ends with a note to women who believe God might be calling them to confront false teaching in their own churches. Counsel women carefully, making sure they understand the difference between false teaching, personal preferences, and areas where scholars agree to disagree respectfully. If they do believe their church is infiltrated with false teaching, they should follow Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18:15–17, going to the offender first, then involving witnesses, and finally taking the issue to the leadership. They are not free to gossip, slander, or create factions within the church, as these actions and attitudes are sin. Caution women to tread



carefully, and ultimately, if the issue is not resolved, they are free to worship elsewhere.

We don't know exactly what the two rewards in questions 20 and 21 look like. Manna was the miraculous bread that God provided the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16:3–4). We don't know why this new manna is hidden or exactly what it will be, but obviously it's good. Neither do we know exactly what the white stone refers to, although scholars think that everyone in the Book of Life will be given a new intimate name just between them and Jesus, much like a special name we might share with a spouse or child when we want to express how special they are and how much we love them.

Question 22 asks why Jesus identified himself as the sharp double-edged sword to the church at Pergamum. Some women may relate the sword to Hebrews 4:12–13. These passages refer to the sword as the Word of God, the Scriptures, which set a standard by which God judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Others may see this sword as vengeance on those who have scoffed at God and fought against him and his work on the earth. Both answers ultimately relate to God's judgment on the earth.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Add symbols of the new rewards to your reward board—for the hidden manna, possibly an artifact of bread, and a white rock with a name on it. Let the board remind the women of the continuous rewards and blessings promised to those who overcome. Display the board every week.
- Paint rocks white, add special names of women in the group that will make them feel appreciated and loved, and give them as gifts. Or ask the women to paint white rocks with special names for one another.
- Show pictures from magazines of unhealthy cultural icons or manifestations. Discuss respectfully why they might be hazardous to believers who allow them to influence their thinking and actions. Also, consider how to connect with people in the culture for the purpose of evangelism.

LESSON 5

Thyatira: The Church Who Tolerated Jezebel

LESSON CONTENT

Like the church in Pergamum, the church in Thyatira pleased Jesus in some ways. Jesus lauded Thyatira for their actions, love, faith, and perseverance. He also delighted in their spiritual progress. But they too tolerated a false person in their midst, a Jezebel-like character that encouraged moral sin and taught incorrect doctrine. Jesus had been patient with her, hoping she would repent, but she had not. Now he was ready to discipline her and those who followed her.

TROUBLESHOOTING

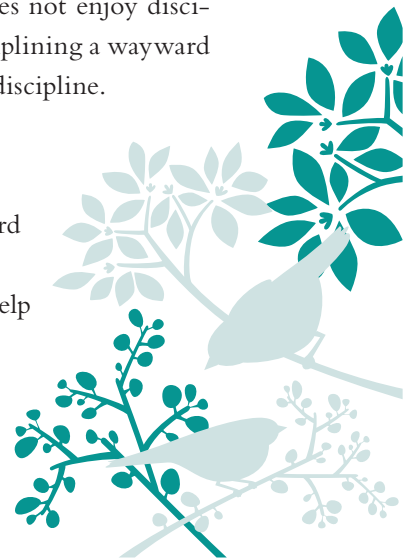
Question 1 relates to the penetrating, blazing eyes of Christ. This picture alone hints at the disciplinary nature of the letter.

In questions 12–16, students are asked a number of questions that pertain to God’s discipline of the disobedient believer. Jezebel will be cast on a bed of suffering, probably a reference to illness or disease that God will use to get her attention. James 5:13–20 reveals that some physical illnesses are the result of sin in people’s lives. In 1 Corinthians 11:27–33, we observe Paul explaining that those who have treated the Lord’s Supper with contempt and carelessness are “weak and sick and a number . . . have fallen asleep.” Some scholars believe this verse teaches that occasionally God will take the physical lives of disobedient believers to keep them from harming themselves and others. They do not lose their salvation but their physical lives on this earth are cut short.

These questions are hard truths and may cause some in the group to see God as vindictive or cruel. Draw out students who understand that God disciplines those he loves for their good and the good of others around them. He does not enjoy disciplining his children, just like an earthly parent does not enjoy disciplining a wayward child. But both do so in the best interest of the one receiving the discipline.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Add an artist’s rendition of the Morning Star to your reward board.
- Ask the women to write a letter to the women of Thyatira to help them overcome their temptations and challenges.



LESSON 6

Sardis: The Church Who Looked Good on the Outside

LESSON CONTENT

The church at Sardis was full of hypocrites, pretenders, people who acted spiritual on the outside but inside they were fakes. And they didn't even know it! Praise is absent in this letter and the rebuke is harsh. Jesus is ticked off! Young people today also dislike church people who are not who they pretend to be. Use this lesson to help women recognize this devastating flaw for individuals and for congregations.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Question 15 addresses what it means to *strengthen what remains*. Jesus is telling these people to look back at what made them strong in the past, to their roots which were strong and true. Then see how they can again focus on what they were taught that made them thrive in the past. Question 17 addresses the issue of incomplete deeds. These people did not follow through on their good intentions, so their deeds are worthless. Jesus admonishes them to finish what they start. If they ignore his warning, he will come with discipline, like those who scaled their cliffs and snuck into their city.

In 3:5, Jesus says he will acknowledge overcomers to his Father and the angels at the *bema* seat of believer's rewards. Because Jesus says he will not erase names from the Book of Life, we cannot assume that this is his practice. Instead, Jesus is expressing that the overcomer's name is completely secure (1 John 5:5–12).

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Add symbols of the rewards for overcomers listed in this letter, possibly white material, or a tiny book representing the Book of Life.
- Create a certificate praising each individual member of the group and listing ways she has overcome challenges in her life. Present these certificates in a ceremony.



LESSON 7

Philadelphia: The Secure Church on Shaky Ground

LESSON CONTENT

Although most of us think of Philadelphia as a large thriving city, its namesake was a small town built on a fault line in Asia Minor. Despite its size, this little faithful church sets a fine example for Christians today, and Jesus' letter to it contains a magnificent promise that believers will be spared a terrible "hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world" (3:10).

TROUBLESHOOTING

Question 10 asks women to dissect verse 10, a passage used by scholars who believe that the rapture occurs before the Great Tribulation, meaning Christians will not be on the earth to suffer the events described in the middle section of Revelation. This view is called the premillennial pretribulation view of end times events. Question 11 asks students to study 1 Thessalonians 5:1–10, a passage also used to support this view. A note at the end of the question encourages women to discuss these views graciously. If you, or others, hold a different view, consider this lesson as a means to understand this perspective.

In question 12, pertaining to rewards, students are asked why overcomers will be pillars in God's temple. These kinds of pillars held up the temple, a picture of stability and security. Jesus may have chosen this picture because the Philadelphians lived in an insecure place, and the contrast would have encouraged them.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Add a picture or replica of pillars in a temple to your rewards board.
- Make signs for each member of the group to wear during the discussion that displays a "new name" (3:12b). This name could be an encouraging adjective, a quality that you have observed in this student. Alternatively, you could write on the skin of each participant in washable ink, if you think the women would enjoy that activity more.
- Show a film clip of an earthquake to emphasize the instability of Philadelphia.



LESSON 8

Laodicea: The Church Who Nauseated Jesus

LESSON CONTENT

The background of this city is important to our understanding of Jesus' letter to the church there. Be sure to "connect the dots" as you introduce the lesson. Laodicea receives no commendation, only rebuke and stern warnings.

TROUBLESHOOTING

Verse 20 has often been misinterpreted as Jesus welcoming nonbelievers to faith. However, in context, we see Jesus is asking believers to overcome half-hearted responses to his incredible love. The picture of Jesus opening a door to come in and enjoy a meal together portrays deep fellowship that is possible only when believers are sold out to him. My hope is that this lesson unsettles and dislodges women who are lukewarm in their faith.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Add a miniature throne to your reward board. Spend some time reviewing the different rewards Jesus promises overcomers.
- Prepare a tall glass of tepid water for each participant. Mix in a harmless (in case women actually take a drink!) substance that makes the water look murky and serve during the discussion as a visual aid.
- Women were asked to draw or picture the scene of Jesus' invitation to a meal in question 22. Give women an opportunity to show and explain their art.



LESSON 9

Our Eternal Home: Revelation 21 and 22

LESSON CONTENT

Revelation 21 and 22 may be the most beautiful, exciting chapters of the whole Bible. This lesson takes us deep into the mysteries of the future and finishes with Jesus' final words to John. Every time I read and study these ending words, I am awestruck. My prayer is that you and other women in the study will respond the same way.

I have included four questions at the end of the lesson to help students synthesize what they have learned. Don't cut this lesson short. Break it into a two-part discussion if you sense you cannot get through it in one sitting. The last four questions could be used in a separate wrap-up session that includes a celebration.

TROUBLESHOOTING

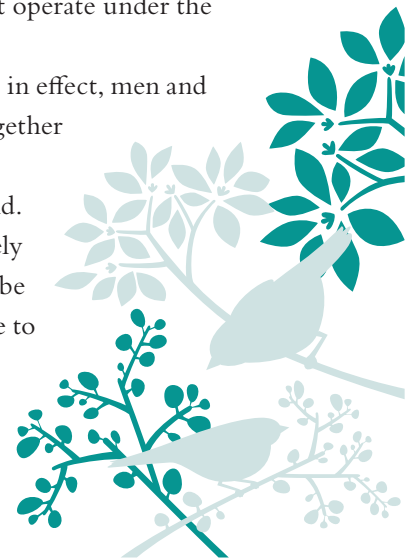
Set ground rules as you begin the discussion. Insist that women not argue over whether or not the author meant the passage to be literal or figurative. Instead, enjoy the beauty of the verses. The images are breathtaking. Don't let anyone destroy the experience.

Verse 1 reveals that the oceans as we know them will be replaced in eternity by waters of life flowing from the throne of God. Some women, like myself, love the sea, and may be sad when they realize it will disappear. Simply emphasize that the sea is a symbol of destruction in the Bible (for example, the Great Flood of Genesis 6–9), but massive crystal clear waters will continue to exist.

Some students may wonder how the tree of life, singular, can be on both sides of the river. Again, emphasize the mystery of these scenes, and encourage the women not get bogged down in these kinds of details. Somehow God will work this out perfectly. We are looking at a new realm of existence that does not operate under the natural laws that govern our existence now.

In answer to question 13, without the curse from Genesis 3:16b in effect, men and women will treat each other as brothers and sisters, partnering together without the need for competition or control. Praise God!

Different views on what it means to reign with Christ abound. Some say we will receive rewards and crowns and immediately place them at Jesus' feet in worship. Others contend that we will be involved in projects and partnerships for eternity, without the curse to



shackle us. Again, we don't really know. We do know that whatever it means to reign with Christ, it will be exhilarating and perfect.

Question 20 encourages unbelievers to consider trusting Christ and entering into God's family through faith alone in Christ alone, and to discuss this with their leader or a mature woman in the class. If you have unbelievers in the group, be prepared for this conversation.

CREATIVE ARTS IDEAS

- Add images from throughout Revelation 21 and 22 to your rewards board.
- Locate artists renditions of the new heavens and the new earth and display them for the group.
- Act out Revelation 22:7–21 by having someone read the part of John and someone else read the part of Jesus.
- Give artistic women in the study opportunity to paint, write, or sculpt some aspect of the study. Prepare a gallery where they can explain and display their work. Use this activity as a way to end your time together, celebrating all you have learned.

WILL YOU SAY GOOD-BYE OR GO ON TOGETHER?

Is this a short-term group, or do you, as the leader, want to continue meeting? The first decision is yours. Count the cost. Is the group thriving? Bonding? Committed? Worth the effort you are investing? Answer these questions honestly. Every group has a beginning and an end. Is this the time for your group to disband? If so, tell the group your reasons, kindly but emphatically. Don't be pressured into continuing against your better judgment and God's leading.

If you determine you're excited about leading the group through another study, you may want to poll the group to learn their desires. If so, plan a date to meet for a brainstorming session on what to study and what changes might be in order, if any. (Check out www.discovertogetherseries.com for additional study options.)

Either way, use the last gathering of this study to celebrate what has been accomplished. Plan a time that fosters a sense of closure, possibly festive food, a potluck brunch or luncheon, or some other special activity. For example, you might review what you learned from Jesus' letters to the seven churches or how the last two chapters of Revelation changed your view of heaven. You could list benefits you enjoyed as a result of the study. You might talk about changes you observed in the members as a result of sharing this study. In some way, celebrate this final chapter in your group experience. Praise and thank God for what he has done in your lives individually and as a worshipping community. If any of the participants are leaving the group, be sure to say good-bye and pray for them.