

## **Bible Reading Challenge 49: THE CHURCH – ON TO GLORY!**

The year is somewhere around A.D. 95. John, who was probably one of the youngest of the twelve apostles, is now a very old man. All of his fellow apostles have been executed, some in terrible ways, for preaching the gospel. Peter, Matthew, Thomas, the mighty Paul, all gone . . . The city of Jerusalem, with its beautiful temple, has been destroyed by Roman armies. John himself is a prisoner on the tiny, rocky Island of Patmos where he is kept in a cave. He might be grateful he's still alive, because times are dark for the church. The earliest Christians expected Jesus to come back in their lifetime, but most of them have passed on and the devil still seems to be in charge—or maybe not. Even though the Emperor Domitian has unleashed all his fury on the church, and believers are chased into the hills or thrown to hungry lions in the arena, their numbers are actually increasing. The Spirit, Jesus' divine Helper, has not rested since the day He arrived, during the feast of Pentecost.

One Sunday John was at prayer when suddenly—well, here's how he puts it: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see! . . .'" Turning around, John was plunged into a series of wild, vivid visions that have troubled and thrilled and frustrated readers ever since. It's the book of Revelation, sometimes called the Apocalypse: a vision of the end of the world. Revelation is so complex and detailed we don't have time to explore it fully, but it may help to remember that it's a book of "sevens": it begins with Jesus speaking to seven churches, after which the scene shifts to heaven itself, where a lamb breaks seven seals on a scroll. Then seven trumpets blow, seven signs appear in the heavens, seven bowls of wrath are poured out, and seven great events signal the end of all time. One of the most unsettling scenes in the book of Revelation is the appearance of Jesus himself: both as a helpless, bloody lamb and an avenging king with a sword coming out of his mouth, trampling down the wicked. He came first to save the world. When he comes again, it will be to judge it.

Christians disagree about what Revelation says about the future, but the last visions are clear: the devil is finally and fully defeated, a new Jerusalem replaces the old, Christ is reunited with his church (the Bride) and "now the dwelling place of God is with man." All former dwellings--a lush garden, a tent in the desert, two grand and one not-so-grand temples—are no longer necessary. God's people have reached their promised land—they have reached *Him*. No more wandering: we're home at last.

**Reading for This Week:** I John 2:18-3:3, Revelation 18-22

**Further References:** Psalm 102:25-28, Ezek. 37:27, 47:12

**Key Verse:** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man." Rev. 21:3a

### **Questions to Think and Talk about:**

1. What will we be like in heaven? (see I John 3:1-3)
2. What is the book of life? (Rev. 21:12, 15) What do you have to do to get your name written there? How will those not in the book be judged?
3. What two cities frame Revelation 18 and 21? How are they described? What is the origin of each?
4. Compare Genesis 2:9 with Rev. 22:2 (see also Ezek. 47:12): why is there no tree of knowledge in New Jerusalem? Why no temple? Why no sun?
5. What's the meaning of fire and smoke in Babylon? What's the meaning of water in New Jerusalem?
6. What is Jesus' last message and who is it directed to? What is the Spirit's (and the Bride's) last message and who is it directed to? What does that tell us about the church's business in these "last days"?

### **Activities:**

- Look up the Greek letters for Alpha and Omega and use them in a poster design.
- From the description in Rev. 21:10-27, draw a diagram of the Holy City.
- In Rev. 1-3, Jesus speaks to seven churches of "Asia" (modern-day Turkey). What does he say about each one? Write what you think he might say about *your* church.