

A New Heaven and a New Earth

Acts 11:1–18

Ps. 148

Rev. 21:1–6

John 13:31–35

Goal for the Session *Through Revelation’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth, adults will renew hope despite evil, death, and suffering.*

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Revelation 21:1–6

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Greg Carey

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WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Erik M. Heen

The Apocalypse reveals that the pain that comes with life as we know it is acknowledged by a God who, once mortally wounded by our sin, continues to stand in solidarity with us in the midst of the suffering experienced by all of creation (21:3). Revelation also informs us that it is only when God’s word is spoken over this deeply troubled creation—yet once again—that evil is banished, hope is restored, and all things are made new, including our understanding of the immutability of heaven itself.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Dana Ferguson

“It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (v. 6). These are words that matter at the very heart of life, where we ask who we are, who God is, and what is the value of the Christian pursuit. They tell us that there will be a new day when we live face to face with God. All that has hindered, hurt, and hampered us will be gone. What will be left is a life with God, filled with relationships of joy and strength with God’s people.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Michael Pasquarello III

The center of this story is Jesus Christ—his life, suffering, death and resurrection, and promised return in glory—the focal point on which the destiny of the universe turns. Apart from God’s gracious Word and gift of self-giving love through him, we could never know these things on our own, since our minds are so deeply colored by the world’s heart-breaking news. “Behold, I am making all things new!” We need imaginations nourished by the word and sanctified by the Spirit to connect what is visible and invisible—the reconciliation of heaven and earth—seeing the past, present, and future of all things through the light of God’s glory in Christ.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Revelation 21:1–6

Focus on Your Teaching

Adults approach death and suffering in many ways—with denial, fear, curiosity, concern, and sometimes, in the case of death, even with relief and welcome. Some view suffering and in some cases death as the work of personified evil in the form of the devil; others see such personification as out-of-date superstition. You may have all of these views in your class today. Be sensitive to participants who have had a recent bereavement. Let them express their feelings. Some may feel relief or blessing; others may express hurt, anger, or bitterness.

O Lamb of God, Alpha and Omega, give me wisdom and pastoral insight so that I may teach with compassion and witness to my own faith and hope in you. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- markers
- scissors
- glue
- construction paper
- tape
- magazines and newspapers
- copies of Resource Sheets 1 and 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 26, 2019

For Responding

- option 1: pens, paper, boards or newsprint, markers
- option 2: construction paper or colored card stock, scissors, rulers, fine-tipped markers, Resource Sheet 1, small stickers, glitter glue, other decorative materials (optional)
- option 3: pens, paper

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, set out magazines, newspapers, glue, scissors, markers, and sheets of construction paper. If you intend to use option 3 in Responding, get from the minister or church office the names of members who are ill.

Welcome arriving participants. Invite them to search the newspapers and magazines for pictures or stories about world or local disasters, wars, suffering, and evil. Have them cut out the items and glue them onto sheets of construction paper. Participants may print additional words or phrases of events that are not mentioned in the media sources (for example, 9/11, earthquakes, particular wars). Display the papers on a wall or the board.

Gather the group where everyone can see the papers, and ask:

✠ What emotions are evoked by suffering and disasters like these?

Keep the papers displayed for reference in Closing. Explain that in the focus scripture for today we will look at a Bible passage that was written at a time when Christians were facing particular suffering, evil, and death.

Pray the following or a prayer of your choosing:

O risen Lord, you know the many ills in the world and the fears represented in this room. Be present with us in this session and help us to hear a message of comfort and strength in your Word. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Revelation) and have participants read it in silence. Then have a volunteer read aloud Revelation 21:1–6. Form pairs and have them discuss this question:

- ✿ What good news do you think the original readers would have heard in this passage?

After a few minutes, gather as a whole group and have a few volunteers offer responses to the question discussed in pairs.

Eschatology is a branch of theology focusing on the last days. Eschatological poetry deals with such topics as God's future kingdom, Christ's second coming, the final judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the establishment of a new heaven and a new earth.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Revelation 21:1–6) and invite a volunteer to read aloud the “What?” excerpt. Discuss:

- ✿ What good news do you hear in the message of the new Jerusalem?
- ✿ Why is it appropriate to read about the new Jerusalem in the Easter season?

Now have a volunteer read aloud Revelation 21:4, and then another read the “Where?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Ask:

- ✿ How do verse 4 and the “Where?” excerpt relate to the issues that were raised in Gathering?
- ✿ How do verse 4 and the “Where?” excerpt relate to your own experiences?

EASY PREP

Working with one's hands is a release for emotion. It is also an opportunity to converse with others similarly engaged. All of today's activities in Responding call for participants to use their hands.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Litany of Hope** Provide pens, paper, boards or newsprint, and markers.

Have participants read the “So What?” and “Now What?” excerpts from Resource Sheet 1 and underline the phrases they hear as good news in the excerpts.

Form pairs or groups of three. Each group will write a short litany that will be used in Closing. Encourage members to use some of the phrases they underlined in the excerpts or phrases from the focus text that mean most to them. As they work, participants may well talk about their own experience with grief or about their hopes.

If necessary, explain that a litany is a prayer in which a leader prays a series of petitions, pausing after each petition for the group to answer with a repeated response. Suggest that it may be easiest to begin by deciding on the response (for example, “For these things we thank you, Lord” or “You give us hope, O Christ” or “We praise you, Lamb of God” or “Have mercy, O Lord”). Then the petitions can be developed accordingly.

Each group should decide which person will lead the prayer in Closing. Have the group print the response on a board or newsprint so all can join in easily.

- 2. Bookmarks of Hope** Provide construction paper or colored card stock, scissors, rulers, and thin markers. Optional: small stickers, glitter glue, or other decorative materials.

Read the “Now What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Focusing on Jesus and the promise to make all things new, make Bible bookmarks that will be a daily reminder of the good news in the focus text. Have each participant cut a thin strip suitable for a bookmark and decorate it with a favorite verse from the focus text. Encourage them to choose a verse that will be of real comfort to them in time of need or distress.

- 3. Comfort in Need** Many people do not know what to say to others in a time of need. This activity will enable adults to develop practical ideas and to hear those of others. It will also enable them to hear and share a word of hope and faith.

Provide pens and paper and have participants imagine that they are ill, perhaps in a hospital, and that a friend from church comes to visit. Have them write down some words of comfort and hope they hope that person will say. Form pairs and compare what each wrote. As a larger group discuss best practices that people who have visited others in nursing homes and hospitals have learned.

Invite each person to take the name of someone who is ill and make a commitment to visit him or her in the coming week, either in person or by phone. Suggest that they call the hospital or home before stopping by to visit, to check that visits are appropriate.

CLOSING

While focusing on the pictures posted in Gathering, have each person say one phrase or sentence that summarizes what they have gleaned from the session.

If the group developed litanies in option 1 in Responding, use them now. Ask the leader(s) to indicate the response for the particular litany. Display the response where all can see it. It should be removed as the next response is posted.

If you did not develop litanies, pray a prayer that acknowledges the lordship of the Lamb and that expresses trust and hope in God’s final triumph over evil and death.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 26, 2019, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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Revelation



There are few things as inspiring as the writings of those who, in the face of grave danger, firmly and joyfully proclaim their faith. Revelation is such a book. From 100 BC to 100 CE many Jewish and, later, Christian “apocalypses” (meaning “unveilings”) were written to encourage perseverance in faith in times of great stress. Such writings gave comfort to those who were persecuted. Revelation was probably written in the last years of the reign of Roman Emperor Domitian (81–96 CE). Domitian believed in his own divinity and began a fierce persecution of Christians who refused to engage in emperor-worship.

Experts are not sure who wrote the book, other than that his name was John. Patmos, where John was imprisoned, is off the coast of Asia Minor. In the book of Revelation, it is clear that John not only understands his readers’ predicament of persecution but also shares in it. He looks forward to the overthrow of the Roman Empire and the coming of the reign of Christ. John is convinced that God is in control of history and will ultimately destroy evil. Rome will fall and Christ will triumph. The Lamb who was slain will be worshiped and glorified. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

John cleverly disguises his message in images that would appear to be nonsense to a nonbeliever and would thus help the book survive detection. The book abounds in mythological creatures and odd symbolism, which first-century Christians would have understood. Unfortunately some people today take the apocalyptic imagery literally, and often come up with bizarre theories about the end of the world. It would be far better to take the poetic imagery for what it is, and to rejoice in the strong faith, encouragement, and comfort that are to be found in the book.

Revelation has three major parts: introduction and messages of Christ to the churches (chapters 1–3), visions of judgment and the victory of the faithful (chapters 4–20), and vision of God’s kingdom in terms of a new Jerusalem, a new heaven, and a new earth (chapters 21–22). Today’s passage comes from the third section of the book. As we read Revelation’s promise of a new heaven and a new earth, our faith and hope are renewed despite evil, death, and suffering in our lives.