

GUIDELINES

**BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S
MINISTRY AND MISSION**

SEP–DEC 2026

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Edited by Rachel Tranter

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Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email enquiries@brf.org.uk, phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

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The editor writes...



The issue of *Guidelines* you hold in your hands is packed with wisdom, insight, celebration, lament, and challenge. I hope you will join us to discover the riches it contains!

‘The Christian life is a matter of waiting and preparing, coming ever closer to the Lord’ – so writes Henry Wansbrough as he encourages us to approach Advent with the right frame of mind. He explores a range of texts from the Old Testament, from the gospels and from Paul’s letters through this important season of preparing our hearts.

With the Christmas period often full of rampant consumerism and over-spending, Sarah Edwards encourages us to consider ethical finance. Sarah works with the JustMoney movement and she hopes ‘to help make connections between money and our faith, understanding what this means for how we live individually and corporately, and how we speak out prophetically to the world around us’.

We are also offered a range of notes on Old Testament texts: Bill Goodman begins a two-part series looking in depth at Deuteronomy; Miriam Bier Hinksman offers us new insight into the sometimes overly familiar story of Ruth; Victoria Omotoso brilliantly brings to life the book of Joel and invites us to discover God’s enduring presence with us; Amy Scott Robinson looks at Jeremiah’s prophetic images and what they teach us about God and his character; and finally Tanya Marlow finishes off her brilliant and challenging series on Job.

In the New Testament, Steve Walton kicks off our study of Mark (Andy Angel and Isabelle Hamley will continue this series in subsequent issues), covering the first eight chapters in detail. Andy Angels takes us through 1 and 2 Thessalonians, drawing out how they give us unique insight into the crises, passions and experiences of our early forebears in faith. Helen Miller explores Revelation, encouraging us to see the primary focus of this book as Jesus.

As ever, may these offerings in *Guidelines* expand your vision of God and Christ, and lead you closer to the God who loves you infinitely.

With every blessing

Rachel

The prayer of BRF Ministries

*Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF Ministries
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family it is today.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake.
Amen.*

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Revelation

Helen Miller



‘The revelation of Jesus Christ...’ (Revelation 1:1a, NRSV).

It is easy to gloss over the introductory lines of a text, saving concentration until the main body of the argument begins. However, these opening words are key to understanding Revelation’s meaning.

By using ‘of’, the NRSV maintains the ambiguity present in the Greek. Does ‘the revelation of Jesus Christ’ mean that this is revelation *about* Jesus or *from* him? The NIV is probably correct to identify ‘from Jesus’ as the primary meaning. However, Revelation is also about Jesus. While not groundbreaking, remembering that Revelation is about Jesus is essential in reading Revelation well. Those who turn Revelation into a secret code that only they can decipher or identify precise references to people and events in our own day have probably lost sight of this, approaching the text as if it were, first and foremost, about us.

As God-breathed scripture, Revelation speaks to us, as it does to people of all eras. But its primary subject is God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – specifically the significance of Jesus’ work in the unfolding of God’s plans for his creation. Other topics are viewed through this lens. Earthly kingdoms rise and fall, but there is one king who reigns over all. We follow him, the Lamb, or we follow the beast. We’re citizens of the New Jerusalem or of Babylon. We’re headed towards the new creation or the lake of fire. Such polarisations are one of the main ways that Revelation makes its rhetorical appeal. It’s not that John is ignorant of life’s complexities – the churches he writes to demonstrate the mix of good and bad that is typical of our own churches. However, shades of grey aren’t permitted to cloud his central message: this is who Jesus is; how will you respond?

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from the NIV.

1 Cloud rider

Daniel 7

‘Look, he is coming with the clouds’ (Revelation 1:7a).

In Daniel 7, Daniel sees a vision of four beasts. The first looks like a lion, the second a bear, the third a leopard, and the fourth has massive iron teeth. Daniel is told that these beasts represent four kings, or kingdoms – the language is used interchangeably. It is disputed which kingdoms they represent. Probably the first beast represents the kingdom of Daniel’s day, the Babylonian Empire, and the next three, the kingdoms that followed (the Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires). These beasts are ferocious, but their reign is temporary and limited.

Daniel’s eyes turn to heaven, where he sees a vision of God. What is God doing amidst the terrifying rise of the beasts? Is he pacing anxiously? Is he rallying the heavenly army? No, he is sitting (v. 9)! In the Bible, God is often depicted as sitting or walking. There’s only one place where he runs – in the parable of the prodigal son, when the father runs out to meet his lost son. Here, God’s location on his throne amidst the beasts’ rise and fall indicates his sovereignty over his creation.

Daniel then sees ‘one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven’ (v. 13) who is given an eternal kingdom (v. 14). Who is this cloud rider? John’s answer is clear. He is the one ‘who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father’ (Revelation 1:5–6a).

Why have I started notes on Revelation with an overview of Daniel 7? Daniel 7 reminds us that God is sovereign over his creation. Human kingdoms can and do rebel against his loving reign. They act unjustly, they wreak misery on their citizens, and persecute God’s people. But their reign, though fearsome, is temporary. The one like a son of man will establish a kingdom that will never pass away. This is what Revelation depicts: the coming of God’s kingdom on earth. It is a work that only Jesus can achieve but, as we’ll see in the days to come, God’s people have a role to play.

2 Lord of the church

Revelation 1:9–20

‘And among the lampstands was someone like a son of man’ (v. 13a).

One ‘like a son of man’ recalls Daniel 7. The reference to clouds in Daniel 7:13 and Revelation 1:7 is significant. It reminds us of God’s presence with his people after their exodus from Egypt. At night, his presence is represented by a pillar of fire and, by day, a pillar of cloud (Exodus 13:21; compare 40:34–35). Therefore, the imagery of clouds portrays Jesus’ divinity, while the language of ‘son of man’ signals his humanity.

Jesus’ divine identity is emphasised further in verses 9–20, where John sees Jesus in his ascended glory. John uses descriptions of both the son of man and Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 to convey his vision. Jesus’ hair is white like wool, revealing divine purity (v. 14; Daniel 7:9). Blazing fire surrounds him, signalling divine glory and holiness (vv. 14–15; Daniel 7:9–10). His voice thunders like a waterfall, indicating divine authority (v. 15; Ezekiel 1:24). John’s vision also signifies Jesus’ closeness to his people. His golden sash identifies him as the great high priest (Hebrews 4:14–16; compare Exodus 28:4). He holds the seven churches in his right hand (v. 20). He shares his followers’ suffering, as the one who was dead, and gives them hope through his resurrection to life (v. 18).

When we read Jesus’ messages to the seven churches, we’ll see a mixture of comfort and rebuke. Here, John reveals the identity of the one speaking. Jesus is Lord of his church. He speaks with authority and compassion. His voice trumps all others: the voices of the world that call for compromise; the voices of those who distort doctrine to suit their own ends; the voices of the pragmatists, who appeal to common sense to water down the demands of discipleship. This raises the question, whose voice will we listen to? And, whose voice will we be?

As someone teaching in a Bible College, this challenges me. It is tempting to soften the wholehearted devotion that Jesus calls us to, both in my own faith and in my teaching. As we gaze afresh on his splendour, we’re reminded that ‘love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all’ (Isaac Watts, ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’).

3 Lost love

Revelation 2:1–7

‘Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first’ (v. 4).

Revelation 2–3 is sometimes referred to as the letters to the seven churches. The term ‘letters’ is misleading. It suggests that all each church received were Jesus’ words to them. In fact, Revelation is a single letter that was read aloud in all seven churches. Each church heard Jesus’ words to all the churches in the context of John’s entire vision.

The messages to the seven churches are arranged in the order in which a messenger would travel. In the Lord’s providence, they also form a chiastic structure. A chiasm is an A B A’ pattern (or A B C C’ B’ A’), wherein symmetry is formed through repetition. For example, there is repetition between the first and final messages. Only these two churches (Ephesus and Laodicea) are warned that their existence is under threat if they do not repent (2:5; 3:16). The second and fifth messages also resonate with each other. Jesus has just comfort and encouragement for these besieged churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia). The three churches in the middle are compromised, but even the church in Sardis (which receives Jesus’ strongest rebuke) has ‘a few people’ who are maintaining faithfulness to Christ (3:4–5).

The church in Ephesus is commended for taking a stand against corrupt teaching and practice. They are rebuked because they have lost their first love. Commentators debate whether it is their love for Jesus or each other that has grown dim. The two are inextricably connected (e.g. 1 John 4:7–21). Here, though, Jesus’ focus is probably on the latter. Standing firm in truthful doctrine and godly practice is vital. However, there is a danger that, in seeking to preserve our own and the church’s integrity, we adopt a self-righteous judgementalism that is devoid of the love that should lie at the heart of our Christian faith. What does it look like to hold truth and love together? We have a perfect example in the one who welcomed people as they were but expected them to change, who bore patiently with his first disciples but told them when they erred, and who invited all to follow him but was upfront about the cost. As we reflect on Jesus’ words to the Ephesian church, may his example inspire us to love likewise.

4 Compromised

Revelation 2:18–29

‘These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze’ (v. 18).

Jesus’ messages to the seven churches share a similar pattern. The church is specified, followed by a description of Jesus from Revelation 1. Jeffrey Weima argues that each description is particularly pertinent for the church addressed. For instance, in Thyatira, the most prominent god was Apollo Tyrimnos. Apollo, within Greek mythology, was son of the chief god, Zeus, and so referred to as ‘son of Zeus’, or ‘son of god’. The depiction of Jesus as the Son of God counters Apollo Tyrimnos’ exalted status. Apollo Tyrimnos was the patron god of a trade guild that produced bronze. Therefore, the description of Jesus’ feet (like burnished bronze) highlights his supremacy over this local ‘god’.

Each description of Jesus is followed by a commendation (Sardis and Laodicea excepting). This commendation is followed by a rebuke (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia). Jesus’ rebuke to the church in Thyatira addresses their toleration of those who promote eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. Attention to context explains why these behaviours are highlighted. Weima notes that, within the Roman world, it was difficult to prosper without being part of a trade guild. People in trade guilds shared resources and exerted collective bargaining power. However, being part of a trade guild also involved participation in meals, wherein the food eaten had been dedicated to idols and, within which, sexual activity was often present. Weima argues that Jesus’ rebuke is therefore against those who affirm Christians participating in these meals (Weima, chapter 4).

Relating Jesus’ words to ourselves prompts consideration of ways in which we compromise our commitment to Jesus by uncritical participation in behaviour and situations that are dishonouring to God. Perhaps we compromise our integrity in a work situation for financial gain. Perhaps we join in the office banter or gossip, not considering the pain caused to others. Perhaps our approach to our finances shows little, or no, evidence of Christ’s lordship over this aspect of our lives. Jesus’ rebuke is followed by a call to repent. If we’re aware of areas of compromise in our lives, may we too heed this call.

5 Seated on the throne

Revelation 4

‘And there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it’ (v. 2).

On Google Earth, you can zoom into street view to see where a car park entrance is located or how nice the beach that you’re planning to go to looks. You can then zoom out at speed such that, in an instant, the beach you were looking at becomes a tiny dot and the whole globe spins before your eyes.

With a similarly sharp change of perspective, after Jesus’ messages to the seven churches, John is taken up to heaven, to the very throne room of God. John’s throne room vision recalls Ezekiel’s vision in Ezekiel 1. However, there are noticeable differences. In a royal parade, the importance of the king or queen is emphasised by the grandeur of the entourage that precedes them. So too, Ezekiel’s vision starts, not with God, but with a description of the cherubim who serve him. Their four faces: eagle, ox, lion, and human (Ezekiel 1:10) represent the finest of God’s creation: of the winged creatures, the domestic animals, the wild animals, and, as the image of God, the human as the pinnacle of God’s creative acts. These servants’ grandeur helps convey the majesty of the one they serve, who is, as in Isaiah’s vision, ‘high and exalted’ (Isaiah 6:1) on a throne located above the mighty cherubim (Ezekiel 1:26).

In contrast, John encounters God at throne level (Revelation 4:2). As his vision spans outwards, he sees the unexpected and unprecedented presence of 24 elders, who are also seated on thrones. These elders represent the people of God. Their presence in God’s throne room provides a foretaste of the blessings that await ‘the one who is victorious’ and therefore has the right to sit with Jesus on his throne, just as Jesus was victorious and sat with his Father on his throne (3:21). Perhaps too these elders provide a pictorial representation of Paul’s claims that, even while living on earth, Jesus’ followers are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and seated with him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6). What enables this? We’ll explore this tomorrow when we study Revelation 5.

6 Lion and lamb

Revelation 5

‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!’ (v. 12).

In verse 1, John sees a scroll in God’s right hand. This scroll contains God’s plans for his creation. No one can be found who can open the scroll and so John weeps. He hears a voice, ‘Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals’ (v. 5). John turns, presumably expecting to see a lion, but instead sees ‘a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain’ (v. 6).

Richard Bauckham argues that this contrast between what John hears (lion) and what he sees (lamb) is central to John’s vision (Bauckham, p. 74). ‘Lion of Judah’ recalls the messianic promise that was given to Judah, ‘The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his’ (Genesis 49:9–10). The Lion’s messianic identity is strengthened further by his title, ‘the Root of David’. This recalls Isaiah 11, wherein the Messiah is depicted as a shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, from whom comes a branch bearing fruit. Bauckham argues that this combination of imagery (Lion of Judah and Root of David) raises expectations for a messianic king who will defeat God’s enemies in power. It is surprising, therefore, that when John turns, he sees a lamb who triumphs, not through force, but through sacrifice.

Jesus is presented as judge and saviour in Revelation. Therefore, our understanding is incomplete if we only consider Jesus’ sacrificial death and overlook his resurrection, ascension, and future return. In Revelation 5, however, the focus is on the victory that Jesus achieves by his blood, through which he has ‘purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation’ and ‘made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God’ and ‘reign on the earth’ (vv. 9–10). We can enter Jesus’ kingdom because he took on himself the judgement that should have been on us, enabling us to be reconciled with God. How should we respond? Let us join the expanding crescendo of praise (4:8, 11; vv. 9–10, 12, 13).

Guidelines

When I'm teaching Revelation at Moorlands College, I encourage the students to approach Revelation as they would any other biblical book, asking, first, what did this text mean to those it was first written to and, second, what does it mean to us today? We do this intuitively with a letter like 1 Corinthians, which clearly relates to particular situations and individuals. However, because Revelation contains prophetic imagery and apocalyptic language, we can forget that this text, too, is a letter. It's not a conventional letter but, nevertheless, there is a specific group to whom it was first written: the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Therefore, it's important to understand how the Christians in these communities would have heard John's letter before we relate its teaching to our lives today.

The diversity in these churches suggests that they may have been impacted by Revelation in different ways. Those in Smyrna and Philadelphia, who are standing firm in their faith in the face of persecution, would have heard John's encouragement to keep going. Although their current situation is difficult, God is unfolding his plans and purposes. Jesus' victory is irrevocable and indestructible. Their hope of eternal life is secure. Those in the churches that are compromising would have heard Jesus' rebuke alongside his commendation. Revelation warns to them to repent as well as encouraging them to persevere.

- Which of the seven churches do you most resonate with, either as an individual or a local church?
- To what extent have you, in the past, attempted to read Revelation through the eyes of those in the seven churches?
- What difference might it make to your understanding of Revelation if you paid more attention to what John's vision meant to the seven churches before seeking God's wisdom in relating Revelation to our contexts today?
- I encourage you to keep reflecting on these questions as we continue our exploration of Revelation next week.



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