

The Story of Scripture and Our Place in It

session 1 · the world we long for

Discussion Format¹

Intro

- Spend some time building rapport/hanging out/eating food.
- Ask introductory question: “If you ruled the world, what would it be like?” “What would you change about this world, if you could?” “What kind of world do you long for?”
 - Be prepared to answer the question first, so that others can have time to think.
 - Look for themes of justice, joy, beauty, order, freedom from suffering/evil, etc.
 - Affirm, summarize, and fill in the picture.

Transition: “As we read the Bible, it becomes clear that God’s plan for the world is the world we all really long for, not necessarily in every detail, but in the broad scheme of things, the important matters, like freedom from poverty and suffering, absence of violence and pollution, the presence of peace and joy, beauty and justice. For the next eight weeks we will be considering the story of Scripture (Creation/Fall/Redemption/New Creation) and our place in it. Tonight, we’ll start with New Creation, which deals with the world we all really long for.”

Read: Hand out the Revelation document or have people turn in their Bibles.

- Read the intro paragraph; this will head off speculative discussion about the future.
- Have the group members take turns reading the Scriptures aloud.
- Tell them to listen to the passage and ask themselves what the: 1) **passage says about God** and 2) **what it says about people** (these are your 2 guiding points for the conversation).
- After you read the passage, you might open it up to general observations: “What stands out to you? What catches your attention? How does this passage make you feel?”

Share: Try to focus the conversation on what the passage says about God and what it says about people. Let them share and talk freely. Make it a *dialogue*, that is, look for follow-up questions to the points and questions that they raise. Don’t be afraid of tension or unresolved questions. You don’t have to know all the answers. Follow these **discussion questions**:

- [Q] How does John describe the future world?
- [Q] How does this compare with popular cultural views of the future?
- [Q] What surprises or inspires you about this description?
- [Q] Is there something in this vision of the future that pulls at your heart? Why?
- [Q] Why do you think you long for this? Where might you be disconnected from this vision of God and creation?
- [Q] What effect should the promise of new creation have on how we live now?

Conclusion: “Next week, we’ll be thinking about the beginning of the world and its purpose as we look at creation in Genesis 1.”

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Handout

The book of Revelation was actually a letter that was circulated among the early churches. It was written around 90 A.D. by the apostle John, often referred to as the “Beloved” in the Gospels. Despite its reputation for being a book that starts cults, Revelation was written to encourage the early, persecuted Christians to persevere in orthodox, Christ-centered faith: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). A significant part of this encouragement came from John’s spiritual vision of the future of our world.

The vision of the new creation is not a scientific vision, intended to describe the mechanics of the renewed world; instead, it is a theological vision, intended to communicate God’s plan for creation and humanity, addressing deep, meaningful questions about the longings of every human heart.

Revelation 21:1-5, 22-27; 22:1-7

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴ By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day- and there will be no night there. ²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵ And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. ⁶ And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.” ⁷ “And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

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Leader's Supplement

Skeptics Corner

You will inevitably have some sharp thinkers and skeptical minds in your group, which is great! Our faith is “intellectually coherent and existentially satisfying”; in other words, we have reasons for what we believe and those reasons are deeply satisfying, if we are willing to embrace them. So, don't immediately shut down skeptical questions.

Sometimes skeptical discussion can be fruitful and sometimes it may not be. For instance, it would be good to spend some time thinking about the goodness and novelty of the new creation, what it will be like. On the other hand, it would be unproductive in this setting to get into debates about the millennium. As a CG leader, you will have to rely on the Holy Spirit in order to discern whether or not a question is pertinent or fruitful for discussion. In the end, you don't have to provide all the answers; you are there to facilitate discussion, cultivate community, disciple others, and encourage mission. However, you will need to grow in your own knowledge and skill in these areas in order to be a blessing to the group and the city. Here are a few tips to keep in mind when skeptical questions arise:

1. **Resist the urge to always answer the question first.** Turn the question around for the rest of the group to weigh in. This will generate good discussion and allow the “kingdom of priests” to minister to one another. Remember, you can also ask the questioner what they think the answer is. This not only gives you time to think, but also shows that doubting questions have to be answered by the skeptics as well as by Christians.
2. **Help skeptics doubt their doubts.** Issues that some people require proof for, i.e. Resurrection, existence of God, etc., are also issues that must be un-proved. In a world where the miraculous happens every day, skeptics also need to be able to prove their assertions and claims. For instance, if they say, “Jesus did not rise from the dead. Prove it.” You can fairly ask them to do the same. “Disprove that Jesus did not rise from the dead.” This is good practice because it puts the argument onto faith. At the end of the day, a skeptic can have all the evidence in the world and not believe. God is calling us all to faith, faith on facts and truth, but faith nonetheless.
3. **Feel free to gently dismiss a question.** This material is not meant to generate apologetic debates. Rather, it is meant to communicate the story of the Bible and our place in it. In other words, we are not shooting for speculative discussion but earthy discussion, discussion about how Creation/Fall/Redemption/New Creation affects our understanding of hope, brokenness, acceptance, meaning, purpose, order and so on. If you feel a question is not helpful, gently let the person know that you are willing to discuss it afterwards but that you are concerned that it will take the discussion off track.

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Biblical Commentary

Below are some biblical insights about your passage that may prove helpful in answering questions and moving discussion along. This information is for “supplementary use”; remember this is not a Bible study teaching hour. City groups exist to cultivate Jesus-centered missional community.

Revelation 21:1-7

- The word used for “new” is *kainos* meaning “new in nature or quality,” not *neos* meaning “new in origin or time” (cf. 2 Peter 3:13).² John's choice of words supports the view that there is some continuity between new creation and our present world. Furthermore Romans 8:20-1 has to be considered when attempting to discern the “newness” of the new heavens and earth. It is here that Paul informs us that creation is groaning for the revealing of the sons of God and that He subjected it *in hope* because creation will be set free and enter into the “freedom of the glory of the children of God”.
- The word “passed away” does not mean total annihilation or destruction, but simply means to “go away, leave, be over.” Jesus uses the same word in Mt 22:22 to refer to the Pharisees’ departure from his presence. A similar form of the word is used by Peter in his description of cosmic dissolution and renewal (2 Pet 3:10). However, this does not mean that our world will not experience destruction of any sort. Peter is clear that the “heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved” but the earth and its works will only be exposed: “the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.” Clearly there will be a purifying process for this world to be transformed into the new creation. Whatever the process, it will be a remarkable thing.
- Notice that John uses multiple images to describe the world to come: heavens and earth, a bride, a city, and a temple. These images communicate different theological meanings about the new creation: 1) it will be a physical place 2) it will be a loving, relational world 3) it will be cultural and urban and 4) it will be a place of never-ending worship! We need the kaleidoscope of images presented by John in order to make theological sense of the world to come.

¹ Content of *The Story of Scripture and Our Place in It* is occasionally influenced by Tim Chester & Steve Timmis, *The World We All Want* (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2005).

² Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 280.