Daily readings to prepare for session 8

Day 1: Living hope, the unveiling and our anchor – hope has a name

Read: 1 Peter 1.1–9

Reflect:

‘Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.’ (The character Andy Dufresne in the film Shawshank Redemption)

Despite the horrors of Shawshank prison, Andy – locked up for murders he didn't commit – somehow never let his hope die. He pictured a better future for himself: a home by the ocean, a warm place where he’d live out the rest of his days mending boats. He didn’t just picture it but worked patiently towards it, and his hope in this better story becoming a reality helped him to face the injustices and struggles of prison life.

What was the basis for Peter’s living hope?

Today’s passage comes from the beginning of a letter that Peter wrote to believers who were scattered across territories controlled by the Romans, and were enduring suffering and persecution. Whether Peter was referring to a literal exile or a more spiritual one, the word captures an uncomfortable feeling of being foreigners – at odds with the world in which they live.

First, Peter encourages them by reminding them of what their saviour, Jesus Christ, has done for them. Then, he sets a vision of the future to sustain them in the present. Because Jesus has defeated death, nothing can extinguish the hope they have in him. Hope lives, because Jesus lives. He’s secured for them an inheritance that will never ‘perish, spoil or fade’, and they’re being shielded by God’s power until salvation day (verses 4–5).

This, says Peter, is something to rejoice in, even as they suffer grief and face trials. The ultimate prize is secure. It will all be worth it.

What difference does this living hope make for us today?

Those who believe in Jesus have the same living hope in him today, and eagerly away his return. Indeed, God has not left us in the dark when it comes to the end

of the Bible's big story. The last chapter is called 'Revelation' which comes from the Greek word 'apocalypse', meaning 'unveiling'. The vision shared in the book is like God drawing back the curtains to give us a glimpse of the beautiful conclusion on the other side.

Just as sailors drop anchor to hold their boat in place and keep it secure in stormy seas, Jesus is our anchor. When the waters start to swell and the wind picks up, inexperienced sailors might begin to worry. But the experienced sailor has confidence in their anchor. This is what it looks like to have living hope today. Even in the storms, you can rest knowing your anchor is secure.

Respond:

'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (verse 3). Living hope causes praise to rise. Let it stir in your heart and burst from your lips today!

Day 2: ‘The Alpha and the Omega’ – a vision of Jesus Christ

Read: Revelation 1.1–20

Reflect:

Have you ever met your hero? In the documentary series The Last Dance, Michael Jordan lived under the pressure of being picture-perfect. When he was caught out and parts of his life didn’t match up to expectations, the scrutiny was unbearable.

Looking back on it all he said: ‘If I had to do it all over again there is no way I’d want to be considered a role model. It’s like a game that’s stacked against me. There’s no way I can win.’

There’s a reason they say, ‘Never meet your heroes’. Everyone has a skeleton in their closet, if you search long and hard enough. No person can be the perfect role model we’re really looking for.

Revelation teaches us to look to Jesus. He is the true and better leader; the only one who’ll never let us down.

What would Jesus’ words have meant to their original hearers?

When it comes to reading the Bible, we must place the text in its original context. This is particularly important when reading apocalyptic literature like Revelation.

First, this is a letter. John introduces himself, as was the custom when writing letters in the ancient world, before going on to address the seven churches in the province of Asia (verse 4), all of which were struggling in their different ways.

This is why they needed a vision of Jesus, because when you meet the real Jesus, you find the resources to keep going in him. Jesus is the only leader we can trust because he’s ‘the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end’ (Revelation 21.6, ESV).

Think about it for a second: if you know the ending of the story is a good one, it means you can walk this road called life and not be surprised by its burdens. For the churches in Asia, knowing Jesus as the beginning and the end meant that even if they lost everything, they’d never lose hope.

It’s the same with us. Following Jesus doesn’t mean we immediately arrive at our final destination. Rather, it means we have a compass that always points us to true north; we know where everything is headed.

What does the vision of Jesus in Revelation mean for us today?

Yes, as a general rule it might be better not to meet your heroes. But with Jesus, it’s different. Jesus Christ never lets us down and he’s everything we need.

Respond:

Dwell on the description of King Jesus in today’s Bible passage. What difference does it make knowing he reigns today?

Day 3: Trials, commendations and challenges – feedback for the Church

Read: Revelation 3.1–22

Reflect:

How do you respond to feedback? Do you dread or embrace it?

Some of us hardly hear the words of recognition we receive and become fixated on where things went wrong or the struggles we're facing. Instead of embracing opportunities to grow or persevering in our good work, we might start to feel tired, deflated and hopeless.

On the other hand, some of us get puffed up about the things we think we're doing well and ignore areas we could improve. Perhaps we become complacent, coasting along on the strength of past success. All of these approaches can lead to problems.

In today's passage, John passes on Jesus' specific feedback to three different churches. Notice the way Jesus describes himself to each church in verses 1, 7 and 14. He's the one who 'holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars', the one 'who is holy and true, who holds the key of David', and he's 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.'

Jesus was reminding these churches, and he's reminding us today, of his holiness, authority and intimate knowledge of our true situation. He's uniquely placed to both challenge and encourage us, if we'll listen. And it's important we do, because he's the one we're relying on for our salvation and he's worthy of our best.

What do Jesus' messages to the different churches teach us?

Jesus' words to each church bring some much needed perspective and point them in the direction they need to go. He knows that if we're going to change for the better, we sometimes need to be challenged. And if we're going to persevere when the going gets tough, we'll sometimes need encouragement.

The church in Sardis needed to know that 'a reputation of being alive' is meaningless if you're actually in a spiritual coma, approaching death. Pleasing God is not about putting on a great outward show or just drifting along. Jesus tells them to, 'Wake up!', remember what you've been taught and the grace you've

received, ‘hold it fast, and repent’ (verses 2–3). It’s not too late now but taking urgent action is necessary. None of us know when Jesus will return so it’s best to be ready.

The church in Philadelphia needed to know that even though they had ‘little strength’, their obedience and faithfulness had not gone unnoticed. They may have been looked down on and dismissed by others but Jesus tells them that one day, those very people will acknowledge their value in his eyes. ‘I have loved you,’ he says (verse 9) and he promises them protection and future reward – a permanent place in God’s presence.

Finally, Jesus had some stern words for the church in Laodicea. They were so laid back about him, they were practically horizontal. They were putting their faith and confidence in their wealth, thinking they didn’t really need him. Jesus tells them he won’t be satisfied with their lukewarm commitment – in fact he’ll spit it out (verse 16)! He wants them to love him with all of their heart, soul, mind and strength.

Jesus assured them that this criticism came from a place of love – he wasn’t abandoning them. In fact, he told them he was standing outside and knocking at their door, eager to be invited in (verse 20).

Respond:

Did any of Jesus’ words to the churches resonate with you? Make space to be real with Jesus in this moment, listening to the feedback and encouragement he has for you.

- What opportunities are there for you grow closer to him?
- How can his perspective strengthen your faith and help you to persevere?

Ask Jesus to fill you with his presence and love.

Day 4: The door, the elders and the throne – a vision of heaven

Read: Revelation 4.1–11 and 5.1–14

Reflect:

Do you have a favourite film director? The director's role is less obvious than those of the actors on the screen, but it's also the most influential. The actors may play out the scene but it's the director who governs and shapes everything about the film.

The early chapters of Revelation speak of Jesus as king – the most important actor. This would have been deeply reassuring for Christians living under the heel of Rome, experiencing persecution. In a turbulent world of threats and intimidation, when King Jesus speaks over our lives saying, 'Do not be afraid', he means it.

The book of Revelation also portrays God as the director. His hand in events may be more hidden from view, but that doesn't mean he is not actively influencing and shaping our world. In fact, God is the one calling the shots, and we can be at peace because there's no better director.

What does the vision of the throne in heaven teach us?

Could you get your head around all the mind-blowing description in chapter 4? It's almost as though John didn't have the words to accurately capture the splendour and majesty of God on his throne. The effect is overwhelming.

In amongst it all, he tells us he sees 24 elders sitting on thrones as representatives of God's people – perhaps symbolising the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel from the Old Testament and the New Testament Church led by the 12 apostles. And with them are four 'living creatures' with both familiar and heavenly features, representing a cosmic harmony between heaven and earth. Together they offer up ceaseless praise and worship to God.

The last time we saw this kind of cosmic harmony was in the Garden of Eden, right at the beginning of the Bible's story. Finally, we're coming back to the beginning …

But there's plenty of evidence in our experiences of work, relationships and tragic events today to remind us that the promised restoration and harmony hasn't fully

arrived. But this doesn't mean we're without hope. One day everything will be restored to the way it should be. Even as we wait, God remains in the director's chair. He calls the shots, working out a good plan for our lives.

What does the vision of the Lamb in chapter 5 mean for us today?

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thor's powerful hammer can only be wielded by a 'worthy' person. Thor fears that he could lose his 'worthiness' and thus his ability to wield the hammer.

There's no hammer in chapter 5, but there is a scroll that can only be opened by one who is worthy. John describes one called 'the Lamb' standing among the people of God, in between the throne of God and the four creatures, who is 'worthy' all the time. He does not fear or fluctuate; he is Jesus our king who sacrificed himself to save us.

The chapter ends with 'every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them' praising Jesus for what he has done (verse 13). He's worthy of all our praise!

Respond:

Andrew Peterson's song 'Is He Worthy?' captures this beauty of this truth:

Is anyone worthy?
Is anyone whole?
Is anyone able to break the seal and open the scroll?
The Lion of Judah who conquered the grave
He is David's root and the Lamb who died to ransom the slave
From every people and tribe
Every nation and tongue
He has made us a kingdom and priests to God
To reign with the Son

Why not listen to the song and spend some time in worship now? He is worthy!

Day 5: Tribes, the throne, and the Lamb – a vision of God's people

Read: Revelation 7.1–17

Reflect:

Have you ever experienced culture shock? After the initial disorientation, experiencing a different culture can be life-changing.

We share this planet with 7.8 billion people, and each has their own unique story. In different countries, territories and among people groups there are countless cultural views and practices, food and lifestyle preferences and languages. And while diversity isn't always celebrated in our world, where racism, the oppression of ethnic minorities and the eradication of minority languages are flagrant reminds of our brokenness, Revelation 7 paints a radical picture of all God's people gathered together in worship.

What is the vision of God's people expressed here?

Firstly, John describes hearing angels discuss putting a 'seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God', and the number of these servants is given as 144,000 people 'from all the tribes of Israel' (verses 3–4).

The number 144,000 is probably symbolic and seems to relate to God's covenant with his people in the Old Testament. It certainly doesn't seem to be a literal cap on the number of spaces in heaven because just a few verses later John describes seeing 'a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb' wearing white robes and worshipping God (verses 9–12). This great and diverse multitude seems to symbolise the fulfilment of the New Testament covenant of salvation in Christ Jesus.

When we read the apocalyptic writings in the Bible, it's important to remember that some bits are not to be taken literally. It should also encourage us to understand that there's no cap on God's love, but that his heart extends to all. God invites everyone to receive his grace and longs for all the nations to make their home in him.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he's clear that the gospel is for everyone. ‘It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew and then to the Gentile’ (Romans 1.16).

The believers in Rome couldn’t reconcile their cultural, historical and religious differences. That’s why Paul wrote his richest explanation of the gospel for them. He knew the only thing that could unite such a divided people was the good news about Jesus and his saving work on the cross. The gospel is a great leveller because it teaches us that we’ve all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God but despite this we’re loved and accepted more than we could ever dream or deserve to be.

What makes us part of this vision of God’s people?

Only the blood of the Lamb.

Usually, blood stains. However, the blood of the sacrificial Lamb, Jesus, cleanses us. No stain is too tough and no person too broken for the blood of Jesus to wash clean and make new.

Respond:

Spend time considering how you can support God’s work around the world. Take action today. The gospel is for everyone!

Day 6: Judgement, the city, and the glory – a vision of the new creation

Read: Revelation 20.11–15 and 21.1–27

Reflect:

Have you ever wished things could be different? Or, can you recall a moment when you thought, 'It can't get better than this'? Life is complex. We live in a world that is both beautiful and broken. But Revelation reminds us it won't be always like this.

John describes seeing a final judgement (Revelation 20.11–15). God is seated on a great white throne, which symbolises his purity and wisdom. The imagery is stark, with 'death and Hades' (the realm of the dead) being thrown into the lake of fire, as well as 'anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life'. This is God's defeat over sin and death and the removal of all the brokenness from the world.

All that will be left is beauty. Those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will enter into God's new creation and the new Jerusalem.

What is our future home going to be like (Revelation 21)?

Firstly, the promised new creation speaks of God's commitment to saving not just souls but the whole cosmos. He says: 'I am making everything new!' (verse 5). He's going to restore the entire created order to make it the perfect home for the Lamb and his bride – the people he's redeemed through his atoning death.

Whereas sin separated humans from God's presence, the Lamb has made a way to bring them back together: 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.' Our broken relationship with God will be completely restored: 'They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.' Not only that but the resurrection of Jesus guarantees a perfect body for us: 'There will be no more death.' What a hope!

Secondly, in the new creation we see a new Jerusalem. The description in verses 9–21 is packed with symbolism. While there's a physical element to this description of a place, it also seems to be a representation of God's redeemed people, shining 'with the glory of God' and perfectly reflecting his brilliance (verse 11). The mention of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles of the

Lamb, and the imagery relating to them, unite God's people under both the old and new covenants. They have all been gathered together in this picture of final redemption and restoration. One day, there will be no more wars, racism, or violence. All humanity will be one with each other and with God.

Thirdly, John notes in verse 22 that he doesn't see a temple in the city because 'the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.' Did you notice that the dimensions of the new Jerusalem are given as a perfect cube (verse 16)? This means it resembles the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament sanctuary – the place of God's presence. But now the entire city is the Most Holy Place. There's will no longer be any need for a separate building for God to live in.

What difference does this hope make today?

Do you feel like you're about to give up? Is it all too much? Do you wish it could all be made new? One day it will be.

Until then, cling to this hope: those who believe in Jesus have their names written in the book of life. When Jesus returns, they will enter into the new creation and dwell with him!

Respond:

Read Revelation 21 again slowly. Let your imagination linger over the details of what awaits.

Day 7: The river, the tree and the Lord – a vision of the end

Read: Revelation 22.1–21

Reflect:

Have you ever watched a sporting event that had already happened with a friend and you knew that your team had won, but they didn't? Knowing the score completely changes your experience of the game.

Revelation announces the final score before we've heard the final whistle. In the end, God will put all wrongs right, good will triumph over evil and we will enjoy a perfect creation.

How would the echoes of Eden have encouraged the churches John wrote to?

We started in a perfect world with the tree of life, and by the end we're back in a perfect world with the tree of life. It's as if we've gone full circle. How is this possible?

It's only because of the tree of death. As Christ died on the wooden cross, he took the curses of our fallen world so we can be blessed with new creation. He took our hell so we can have heaven. He was shut out so we can come home.

What do the words of Jesus, 'I am coming soon' mean for you today?

The Bible ends with a simple promise from Jesus: 'Behold, I am coming soon!' This reminds us that although we don't know the exact date, we do know that Jesus will return.

Sometimes it's easier to live as if this were not a reality. But when life's pressures overwhelm us and cloud our perspective, knowing there is something better waiting for us really matters. This isn't our final destination; we're all on the road – hold on and remember you have a compass in Jesus.

At the end of his Chronicles of Narnia, in The Last Battle, CS Lewis finishes the story with the followers of Aslan entering into a new earth and heaven:

For them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world … had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning

Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before.

For those whose hope is in Jesus, the best is yet to come!

Respond:

Take time to thank God today for inviting you in to be a part of this better story. Keep journeying with him.