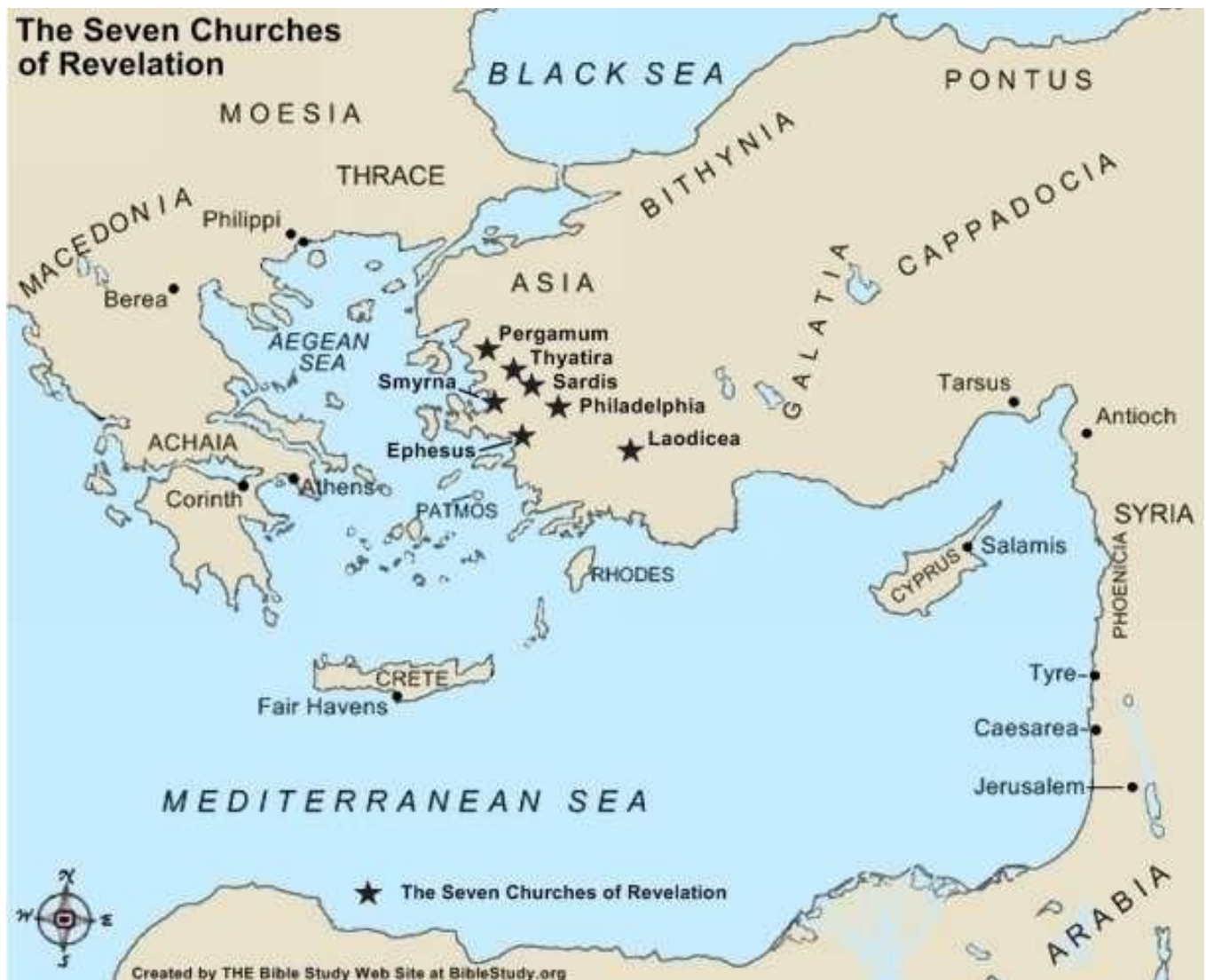


The Seven Churches of Revelation



Faith Chapel, Revelation, an Overview of Interpretive Possibilities

Pastor Nate Poetzel's Notes – 1/11/24

"Everyone thinks of the book whatever his spirit imparts!" **Martin Luther**

Author: Revelation 1:9

Unique: Revelation 1:3 A blessing?

Title: "apokalupsis" 1:1 (apocalypse)

Type of literature: Apocalyptic (Daniel 7-10)

Theme: The Book of Revelation is, strange as it sounds, one of the most difficult, and yet, at the same time, one of the easiest books in the Bible to understand. It is easy because its theme is perfectly clear. It claims to be a prophecy of things to come with the main event centered in the coming of Jesus (Rev. 1:7, 19:11-16). One might get lost in the difficult symbolism and fail to see "the forest for the trees". The main message is manifest—God is on His throne (Rev. 5), the Kingdom of God will triumph over all evil (Rev. 11:15), and the eternal inheritance of the people of God will be gloriously realized (Rev. 5:9-10; 21-22). We are told it is a blessing simply to hear the words of this book and keep what is written in it.

Date of writing: Two main options—written during the reign of: 1) Nero circa AD 54-68, or 2) Domitian circa AD 81-96

- Is Revelation one of the first or one of the last books written?
- Revelation 17:10—Nero is the sixth emperor, the number "666"
10 emperors who persecuted Christians, Nero is the sixth
- Destruction of the temple in AD 70
- The state of the seven churches adds weight to a later date?
- Irenaeus mentions "the ancient copies" of Revelation. (AD 150)

Recipients of the Book: (Rev. 1:4)

- From God, through Jesus Christ, via an angel to John, communicated to his servants
- All very real places that were found on a Roman mail route located in what we today refer to as Turkey

Overview of the four interpretive possibilities

1. **Historical Approach:** Revelation surveys to the whole of Church history

- a. Many church fathers have held to historicism (John Wycliffe, John Knox, William Tyndale, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli, Melancthon, Isaac Newton, Jan Huss, John Fox, Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Finney, Spurgeon, Matthew Henry).
- b. Adhered to by many Seventh Day Adventists
- c. Beliefs: God revealed the entire **Church age** in advance through the symbolic visions of the Apocalypse. Example: breaking of seven seals (6,7) is often said to be the barbarian invasions that sacked the western Roman Empire; the scorpion/locust (9) is said to be the Arab hordes attacking the eastern Roman Empire.
- d. Believes strongly in the "year-for-a-day" principle; God revealed exact time periods but cast them in the symbolism of a year equaling one day.
- e. Aligns specific historic events with certain details in Revelation
- f. Believes the papacy and Roman Catholic Church to be the Antichrist, dragon and illicit woman
- g. Strengths: Fits well with the rise of Islam in the fifth trumpet and the coming of the Turks with the sixth trumpet. History can fit right into an outline of Revelation.
- h. Weaknesses: Few modern scholars support; little agreement on specific fulfillment of prophecy; too flexible in serving its advocates. Does not recognize the Church outside of Europe.

2. **The Preterist Approach:** Fulfillment is mainly in the past, shortly after the time of writing.

- a. Date the book prior to 70 AD
- b. Take the "these things must soon take place" (Rev. 1:1,19, 22:10) seriously/literally

- c. Details of Revelation seem to align with the fall of Jerusalem, destruction of the temple, and demise of Rome.
- d. Fits well with the instructions to not “seal up the book” because the time is at hand. Rev.22:10
- e. Immediate relevance to the readers
- f. Aligns with nonbiblical historians (Josephus) accounts of the fall of Jerusalem
- g. Parallels the Olivet Discourse (Mark 13, Luke 17,21), which were sponsored by the disciples asking when the temple would be destroyed.
- h. Divides into:
 - 1. Fall of Jerusalem
 - 2. Fall of Rome
 - 3. Second coming of Christ.
- i. Weaknesses: Dependence on pre 70 AD writing. Fewer church fathers from 350AD and on support such a view.
- j. Strengths: Takes into consideration the original readers. Sees them as the actual recipients of the prophecy. Takes the original context and setting seriously. Seems to align with how the Early Church understood the book.

3. ***Futurist Approach:*** Everything after chapter three awaits fulfillment in the future.

- a. Held by the many popular, contemporary writers and Bible teachers (J.N. Darby, C.I. Scofield, Charles Ryrie, Hal Lindsey, Chuck Smith)
- b. Dominates the Christian media to an extent that many are unaware that other options even exist
- c. The events of Revelation kick off with the rapture in 4:1 (however the rapture is not mentioned in the book of Revelation).
- d. Revelation divides into three sections (1:19):
 - 1. The things which you have seen (1)
 - 2. The things that are (2,3)
 - 3. The things which shall be (4-22)
- e. Chapters 4-19 are thought to be seven-year Tribulation.
- f. See the book as being chronologically continuous
- g. Takes a more literal approach to interpreting symbols (100-pound hail stones, 1/3 of sea turns to blood, hasn't happened so it must be future)
- h. Confidence is built in this approach whenever a commentator can match a current political or scientific event with the book.
- i. Weakness: Renders the book 90% irrelevant to original readers and to the rest of Church history. Did not formally appear until 1827 with the work of J.N. Darby, the founder of dispensationalism. Cannot be tested from history. Lacks scholarly support. Originated as a catholic defense against the Reformers. Does not take into consideration the traditional genre of apocalyptic literature.
- j. Strengths: Currently very popular among popular pastors and teachers. Like a jigsaw puzzle, passages from different sections of Scripture can be linked together to form a coherent picture of the end. Creates a sense of anticipation regarding the future.

4. ***Spiritualistic Approach:*** No single fulfillment; only transcendent principles and recurrent themes

- a. Does not look for fulfillments of events, but for spiritual lessons and principles
- b. Divorces the book from history and reveals divine principles
- c. A picture of what is taking place in heaven
- d. Good versus evil is the main theme, Christ over Satan
- e. Reveals a philosophy of history in which history is cyclical
- f. Beast is the satanically inspired political opposition to the church of any age.
- g. The Harlot represents either the compromised church or the seduction of the world in general.
- h. Broken seals represent natural disasters, which happen on earth.
- i. Strengths: Has relevance for all readers of all time periods; takes away some of the fear that people might have while reading Revelation; supported by many mainline denominations; recognizes the nature of apocalyptic literature.
- j. Weakness: Takes a lower view of Scripture; can be applied to any situation since it has no historical roots; does not take seriously John's words of prophetic origins.

Seven Letters

Intro to Revelation **Lesson 1 ~ Chapter One**

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. ~ Revelation 1:3

The Book of Revelation was given as a message from Jesus to the apostle John as he was exiled on the island of Patmos. It was originally intended as a letter of encouragement, correction, and hope to be shared in its entirety to the seven churches and other believers scattered throughout Asia Minor. Revelation offers a prophetic and apocalyptic account of the culmination of human history, the ultimate triumph of good over evil, and the establishment of God's eternal kingdom here on earth. Filled with symbolism and imagery, it is a challenging book. Yet it has much to teach us. In fact, it is the only biblical book that comes with a promise – we will be blessed if we read it, hear it, and take it to heart (Rev 1:3).

In this study, we will be looking at the first three chapters of Revelation. Although Jesus' words were given to certain churches in their unique circumstances, this message with its promise of restoration of all things, continues to proclaim His truth to the Church today.

In Chapter One, Jesus is revealed in divine majesty and glory, emphasizing His authority and dominion. It is powerful imagery. He reminds the early church of His great love and the freedom He brings. John, as the recipient of such an overwhelming vision, falls at His feet as though dead, but is reassured by Christ's promise of eternal life and victory over death and Hades. In this week's study, we will lay the foundation for the weeks ahead as we explore the vivid picture of Jesus and are confronted with our beliefs about Him and ourselves.

Step One – Observation

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

Chapters 1

¹The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

⁴John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him

who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne,⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.

⁸“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

⁹ I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.¹⁰ On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,¹¹ which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.”

¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am

the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹ “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Step Two – Key Verse

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

Step Three –Questions

1. The specific time of Jesus’ return is unknown, but the latter part of verse 3 reminds us that the “time is near.” As we anticipate this, what thoughts or emotions does this stir in you? Are you currently living as if this is true? How would keeping this in the forefront of your thinking impact your daily decisions and activities? How would living like this impact the church at large?
2. Review the powerful truths that succinctly spell out the Gospel in verses 5b-6. *To [Jesus Christ] 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—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!* Observe the order of actions. Who is the initiator, what are the results, and for what ultimate purpose? What key words or phrases speak to your heart and why?

3. In verses 7-8 & 13-16, there are many declarations about Jesus. List the varied ways He is described. Do these images differ from how you've previously perceived Jesus? Reflect on one or two and share how these stretch or confirm your present understanding of Him.

4. In verse 17, we see John's response to seeing Jesus. Picture the scene. Throughout the Bible, we often see people fall to the ground when encountering the presence of God. (Review Genesis 17:2-4 & Matthew 17:5-7.) Now look at Jesus' gentle response. It can be easy to move toward what first seems like opposite extremes: the overwhelming holiness of God or His tender compassion. We all have an incomplete understanding of God – which direction do *you* tend to lean? Take some time to explore the “other side” and ask God what might be holding you from embracing more of Him. Pray and share what He reveals to you.

5. In verses 12-13 & 20, Jesus refers to the seven churches as lampstands, and shares that He walks among them. Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12) calls His church to be a light. We are not the source of light, but a reflection of His. Look closely at Matthew 5:14-16 & Isaiah 42:6-7. What does God say about *how* are we to live and *why* it matters?

Step Four – Application & Prayer

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

Step Five – Digging Deeper

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think outside of the box and share a creative, personal, or academic element relevant to this week's lesson. Share a poem or drawing, or take a deep dive into a word study or passage. This is purposefully open-ended to bring something unique to this week's lesson.

NOTES

NOTES

Seven Letters

Ephesus – The Loveless Church ***Lesson 2 ~ Revelation 2:1-7***

John's first letter was for the church in Ephesus. Prior to John's exile to Patmos, he lived in Ephesus and we can expect that he'd be eager to hear what Jesus would say to His former church.

Paul planted the church in Ephesus during a brief visit, then left it initially in the hands of Priscilla and Aquila. Paul would return to Ephesus to spend nearly three years there, discipling the young church that was birthed in a highly pagan culture.

Ephesus, a port city with a population of 250,000, was considered the most important trading center in the ancient Mediterranean. It was known for occultic practices, specifically the practice of magic, and for its worship to the goddess Artemis – seeking her protection, fertility, and provision. The temple of Artemis was also the world's largest bank and this played a major role in the commercial life of the city. In short, people profited based on their ability to convince others to pay for Artemis-backed security.

The new Ephesian converts would have to be bold to preach and minister in a community bolstered by wealth due to goddess worship. For some Ephesians, the Gospel message was welcome and transformative in their lives, but for others it seemed a threat to their economic survival. Thus, Christians in Ephesus were zealous, mutually encouraging one another to maintain their deep love for Jesus. This equipped them with the vigor and passion needed to expand God's kingdom in the riotous and volatile city of Ephesus.

Despite all of the diligence and hard work of the Ephesian church, Jesus demanded that they repent. This week we will examine the correlation between love for God and repentance – why it is important, why was it a challenge for this church, and why it's vital for us today.

Step One – Observation

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

Revelation 2:1-7

¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have

found them false. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

1 John 4:7-21

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. ¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear,

because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.²⁰ Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.²¹ And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Step Two – Key Verse

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

Step Three –Questions

1. Paul and the Ephesian church leaders would likely have prioritized boldness and discernment in their ministry in response to the city’s volatile climate and goddess worshipping culture. The opposition these new Christians faced required perseverance and a zealous faith. But in verse 4, we read what Jesus holds against this church: “You have forsaken the love you had at first.” The “love” might refer to love for God (see Jeremiah 2:2.) It could also include love for other believers. Read 1 John 4:7-21 again, searching for references of love for God. Write down any that stick out to you. Next, think about the times and circumstances throughout your life when you felt closest to God, and describe the feelings you remember. Reflecting honestly, where are you now?
2. Jesus’ condemnation of forsaking our first love might also be directed at how well we are loving our brothers and sisters. For the Ephesians specifically, perhaps their zeal and boldness got in the way of their relationships. When is being bold and speaking out a way of loving others and when is it not? Have you been the recipient or deliverer of zeal in the name of love and how has it impacted your relationships?

3. A definition of repentance is a transformative change of heart, when Christians grieve over what they've done and desire to live in a way that is pleasing to God. It is often a revelation of God's love and kindness that leads us to repentance (see Romans 2:4). If you have put your faith in Jesus, you may remember some of the big life changes that immediately took place. As the years go on, the changes we ought to make may not be as obvious. Read the following verses and share what the Bible teaches about *ongoing* repentance: 1 John 1:8-10, Hebrews 10:26, Proverbs 28:13. Confronting our sin is difficult, but repenting moves us into deeper relationship with Jesus. Ask the Lord if you need to repent of anything now – blind spots, areas where you're stuck, or buried issues. How can (or do) you practice ongoing repentance and keep your conversation with God authentic to experience wholeness?

4. Jesus tells these laboring Ephesians, who were enduring hardships for His name, to repent. This could have been a surprising request for such persevering Christians. Perhaps the Ephesians had been working so well, so hard, for so long that it had become difficult to humble themselves and repent. Or maybe, they simply forgot. When we are working hard, especially for things God cares about, we can inadvertently fall into sin – we can become prideful and lose our focus on Jesus. Sometimes sin can be good deeds with the wrong motives. Consider the possible progression for the Ephesians and describe the same potential trajectory in your own life.

5. While Jesus commends the Ephesians' hard work, perseverance, and willingness to endure difficulty, in verse 5 He lets them know that their service is not a replacement for loving God above all else. Read John 21:15-17. Notice how Jesus first asks Peter about his love for God and *then* asks him to feed and care for the sheep. Every time, Jesus' *first* question was, "Do you love *me*?" Are there times when you have found yourself serving so that others, or God, would love you? In your current circumstances, how can you live so that your love for God

shapes the way you serve in your workplace, home, church, community, etc.? Is there something that needs to change in your daily schedule or commitments?

Step Four – Application & Prayer

Take what you’ve learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week’s reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you’ve learned or anything else on your heart this week.

Step Five – Digging Deeper

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you’re learning. Think outside of the box and share a creative, personal, or academic element relevant to this week’s lesson. Share a poem or drawing, or take a deep dive into a word study or passage. This is purposefully open-ended to bring something unique to this week’s lesson.

NOTES

NOTES

Seven Letters

Smyrna – The Suffering Church ***Lesson 3 ~ Revelation 2:8-11***

Smyrna was a thriving commercial city located 35 miles northwest of Ephesus. Known as “The Crown of Asia,” with its impressive paved and temple-lined streets, it was considered one of the most beautiful cities in the ancient world. A public theater which claimed to be one of the largest in Asia, a famous stadium that held annual athletic games, and a magnificent library joined the temples along the way. Smyrna was known for its wholehearted adoption of Roman practices (including emperor worship) and pagan religious beliefs. This dynamic, coupled with an influential number of Jews antagonistic to Christianity, comprised much of the persecution against the fledgling church.

Although the Smyrna church suffered much from both Romans and Jews, they did not falter. Small in stature but big in faith, they were one of two churches that Jesus did not reprimand, unlike the other five churches who received messages of strong reproof. Jesus had only praises for Smyrna believers. However, His message of encouragement to them was a sobering one. They were about to be tested in ways they couldn’t have imagined, yet Jesus promises them a victor’s crown waiting for them on the other side. In this week’s lesson, we will hear Jesus encouraging His Church with eternal hope, and we will see that with Him meaning can be found even amidst suffering.

Step One – Observation

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

Revelation 2:8-11

⁸“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

¹¹Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

Isaiah 44:6-8

⁶This is what the Lord says, the King of Israel and its Redeemer—the Lord of the Heavenly Armies is his name—“I am the first and I am the last, and apart from me there is no God. ⁷Who is like me? Let him proclaim and declare it, and lay it out for himself—since he made an ancient people. And let him speak future events; let them tell him what will happen. ⁸Don’t tremble, and don’t be afraid. Didn’t I tell you and announce it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? There is no other Rock—I don’t know of any.”

1 Peter 4:12-16

¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. ¹⁵If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. ¹⁶However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.

Matthew 5:10-12

¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Step Two – Key Verse

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

Step Three –Questions

1. Read Isaiah 44:6-8 and write key declarations God makes about Himself. Now look to Revelation 2:8. When Jesus calls Himself the first and the last, He is making a *huge* statement to the persecuted Smyrna believers, conveying three big ideas: 1) He is divine – He existed before all things and will continue through all eternity. 2) He is sovereign – He has ultimate authority and is the supreme ruler over all things. 3) He is the fulfillment of prophecy – He is faithful and unwavering in love. How might these claims have encouraged the threatened and oppressed believers of Smyrna? Which of these declarations do you need to be reminded of and hold on to today?
2. In Revelation 2:9, Jesus encourages the church in Smyrna, assuring them that He *knows* their affliction and poverty. The word *affliction* in this context denotes deep anguish (like a woman in childbirth), and hard pressing (as in the crushing of grapes to make wine). Smyrna believers lost their jobs, homes, and families as they clung to their faith. They were homeless and hungry, yet held fast to Jesus – and He *saw* them. Read Matthew 5:1-12. It is a strange paradox to be blessed and spiritually rich, yet materially poor. In God’s economy, things are often tuned upside down. How can knowing you are seen and blessed in your afflictions shift your perspective? Where have you encountered the “poor” who are spiritually rich? How did it impact your faith and actions?
3. Jesus tells the Smyrna church not to fear the hard times ahead. Fear being a universal response, this is easier said than done! How would you have received a letter such as this one? Would you consider yourself someone who struggles with fear? How has this affected your choices in life?

4. Look back to 1 Peter 4:12-16. The modern, secular West has no answers when it comes to finding meaning in suffering – this is one reason why crises of despair are at epidemic levels (suicide, addictions, nihilism, rage, etc.). The Bible, on the other hand gives hope – it is a guidebook and antidote to despair. Look over the passages you’ve just read and write down several statements that speak of how we can maintain hope even in the darkest times. As you think back over difficult seasons (or are in one now), do these answers satisfy and what questions do you have as you ponder them? (Here are some verses that might help you on your journey: Psalm 62:5-6, Isaiah 40:31, Lamentation 3:21-23.)

5. Jesus prepped the Smyrna church, telling them to get ready, their suffering was about to go from bad to worse. And in the near future, they would soon experience extreme persecution, torture and death. Persecution is not isolated to biblical times. According to Open Doors’ watchlist, over 360 million Christians around the world suffer high levels of persecution with an average of 16 believers killed daily. These are staggering statistics and something we don’t often consider living thousands of miles away, with our own set of trials. But as believers, Christ has united us all in one body. How can we in the West learn more about the global persecuted church and what next steps might God be calling you to, to be more united with these believers? A good place to start is praying Psalm 91:1-2, Eph 6:19-20, 2 Cor 12:9 over them.

Step Four – Application & Prayer

Take what you’ve learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week’s reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

Step Five – Digging Deeper

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think outside of the box (but write inside 😊) and share a creative, personal, or academic element relevant to this week's lesson. Share a poem or drawing, or take a deep dive into a word study or passage. This is purposefully open-ended to bring something unique to this week's lesson.

NOTES

NOTES

Seven Letters

Pergamum – The Worldly Church ***Lesson 4 ~ Revelation 2:12-17***

Pergamum was a magnificent city located 70 miles from Smyrna and 100 miles north of Ephesus. It was a city renowned for its rich history, powerful political leadership, and impressive architecture with significant contributions to various disciplines of art, literature, and philosophy. Hosting the second largest library in the ancient world in addition to an impressive, medical healing center, Pergamum attracted diverse populations of intellectual thinkers and spiritual followers.

Greek temples and shrines dominated the Pergamum landscape, making it the religious center of Asia. It was here where the largest temple of Zeus existed, as well as temples dedicated to Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius. And demonstrating allegiance to Roman leadership, it was the first city to build a temple dedicated to an emperor *still living* and worship him as a god.

In this region where Christianity was a persecuted minority religion, the church of Pergamum served as the place of Christian community and worship. Because of the many pressures from Roman authorities and influences of local pagan religious practices, believers faced extreme challenges. Drifting from doctrine or dying for faith were constant threats. In His letter to the Pergamum church, Jesus had much to say to the body of followers. This week, we will look at how Jesus calls the church to be steadfast in faith and truth while avoiding the dangers of worldly compromise. We will see how cultural influences and faulty teachings can shape our thinking, drive our decisions, and impact our lives – and how holding fast to Him is our only solution.

Step One – Observation

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

Revelation 2:12-17

¹²“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

¹⁴Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate

food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.¹⁵ Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

2 Timothy 4

¹In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ²Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

Titus 2

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹²It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Step Two – Key Verse

Looking back over this week's reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

Step Three –Questions

1. During this time, Roman soldiers had authority to decide who lived and died by the sword, commanding obedience of its citizens. Here, Jesus takes this feared weapon and claims ultimate authority, referring to Himself as the One who has the sharp, double-edged sword. Symbolizing His Word and might, the sword judges, pierces, and destroys the deceitful work of Satan. Read Hebrews 4:12 and share how this verse might convict you of a behavior, action, or thought. Reflect on the power of the Word as shared in Psalm 119: it cleanses us (v9), keeps us from sin (v11); guides and counsels (v24); strengthens (v28); is the source of life (v93); and gives us peace (v165) – this is only a partial list. What specific changes can you make this week that allow you to walk in His authority, truth, and hope?
2. Jesus refers to Pergamum as *Satan's throne*, strong language to reflect Satan's seductive influence and presence. With hundreds of pagan temples, Pergamum exchanged the true God for false substitutes, a direct affront to Jesus. They coopted titles that belonged to Him: Zeus, the heavenly father and god of man; Asclepius, the healer; and Athena, goddess of wisdom to name a few. Yet, the temple dedicated to the emperor, placing man equal with God, may have been the most offensive. Although our cities today may not be filled with temples to pagan idols, false gods are easily found. Name some of the most predominant idols of our day (read Colossians 3:5 for a springboard). Which do you find most enticing and how do you keep Jesus in His rightful place? Who and how have others' journeys (from life, history, or Scripture) encouraged you to stay the course?
3. Antipas did not hide his faith. According to tradition, he was brutally martyred, roasted to death in a bronze bull, sending a painful message to onlooking Christians. In the face of persecution, neither he nor the community of believers fled the city, but remained

unwavering. Jesus described Antipas as a *faithful witness*, the same verbiage used to describe Himself in Chapter 1. Think about what this reflects about Jesus' thoughts toward Antipas, and faithfulness in general. Through Pergamum, we see that living amidst the dark shadows of Satan's territory, it is possible to remain faithful and reflect light. What does it mean for you to be a faithful witness in your sphere of influence and how are you seeing God presently use and equip you? Are there specific areas you can grow in? Read Hebrews 10:23-25 & Titus 2:11-14. How can we strive to stand firm in the face of our own trials and encourage each other in a culture increasingly antagonistic toward Christians?

4. Attacks on the Pergamum church were not just external – they also had festering internal threats growing *within* their community. Jesus reprimanded the church for holding on to its surrounding culture, compromising truth and allowing the world's teachings and values to infiltrate their lives. Jesus' strong words demonstrated His lack of tolerance for false teachers and immorality in the church. Holiness matters to Jesus. Consider how we walk in the tension of living in a pluralistic society, being *in* the world and not *of* the world. Read 2 Timothy 4:1-5 & 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. In today's post-truth culture, many lies are perpetuated as truth. Name a few that presently plague society, leading us into a slow seduction with sin. What ways can we guard ourselves against compromise and false teachings in our modern-day church? How can you foster unity and support with other believers? How can you act in wisdom to address division within the church?

5. As a symbol of God's provision, hidden manna points back to the Old Testament where God supplied manna for the Israelites in the book of Exodus, and points to the New Testament where Jesus is the bread of life, the new manna. The significance of the white stone in Revelation 2:17 is uncertain, but many commentators believe it symbolizes victory, innocence, God's eternal favor, and a new identity in Him. How might this promise have inspired believers in Pergamum to persevere in their spiritual journey? These promises won't

be fully realized until Jesus comes again, but where can you see the Lord already at work in your life? How does this inspire you for what you might still be waiting for?

Step Four – Application & Prayer

Take what you’ve learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week’s reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you’ve learned or anything else on your heart this week.

Step Five – Digging Deeper

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you’re learning. Think outside of the box and share a creative, personal, or academic element relevant to this week’s lesson. Share a poem or drawing, or take a deep dive into a word study or passage. This is purposefully open-ended to bring something unique to this week’s lesson.

NOTES

NOTES

Seven Letters

Thyatira – The Adulterous Church ***Lesson 5 ~ Revelation 2:18-23***

Just east of Pergamum lay the military garrison and merchant city of Thyatira. While the smallest of the seven cities, it was an important Roman military outpost protecting Pergamum and the local region. It was highly traveled and easily attacked by enemies.

Thyatira was also impacted by its thriving trade industry. Thus, much of the work to be found in Thyatira was for military needs or commerce, both heavily influenced by the Roman powers and culture. Most notable were the trade guilds. These guilds were tight-knit groups which held great bearing on one's social and financial success. Oftentimes the only way to find work was to depend on the guild and its partnerships. They closely associated with false gods, partaking in idol worship including sexual practices and sacrifices that would have directly conflicted with the way of Jesus.

A protective and concerned Jesus gives a message of warning to the church in Thyatira. Though strong in faith and deeds and growing in their maturity, they allowed predatory teaching to mislead the believers. Of the seven churches, Jesus has the highest praise and the harshest rebuke for the Thyatirans. In His letter, Jesus warns that the church must expel these false teachers and hold strong until His return. This week we will consider the cultural pressures we face and the temptation to be drawn away from the truth, with the challenge to persevere to the end.

Step One – Observation

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

Revelation 2:18-23

¹⁸“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. ¹⁹I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

²⁰Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. ²²So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer

intensely, unless they repent of her ways. ²³ I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

²⁴ Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, ²⁵ except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

²⁶ To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— ²⁷ that one 'will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery'—just as I have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ I will also give that one the morning star. ²⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

1 Kings 18:4, 18-19

⁴ While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.

¹⁸ "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals.

¹⁹ Now summon the people from all over Israel to meet me on Mount Carmel. And bring the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table."

1 Kings 21:25-29

²⁵ (There was never anyone like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. ²⁶ He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel.)

²⁷ When Ahab heard these words, he tore his

clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly.

²⁸ Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: ²⁹ “Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.”

Step Two – Key Verse

Looking back over this week’s reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

Step Three –Questions

1. List all the ways Jesus describes Himself in this passage. Biblical symbols of glowing bronze and fire represent the process of refinement - burning off the impure (sin) and leaving the pure (righteousness). Jesus also wants the churches to know He searches hearts and minds (verse 23). Consider both Jesus’ purifying presence and His all-knowing gaze. What immediate feelings does this evoke? How might these truths about Jesus convict us? Bring us hope to endure? Knowing Jesus is active in purifying His people, how might you be prompted to respond to His work in you this week?
2. Jesus recognizes the spiritual strengths of the church in Thyatira. In verse 19, what words does He use to describe the church? Jesus also describes two types of people in this church (verses 20 & 24). Make a list of the two types of believers and His command for each group. Jesus has high praise for this church growing in their maturity and kingdom service, yet He sees false teaching has gained a following. Why does Jesus take aim at their “tolerance” in verse 20, and what disaster awaits those on the path of false teaching? What false teaching is loudest in our modern moment? In what ways might we, today, be tolerant when we should take a stand?

3. Read 1 Kings 18:18-21. What does it mean that the prophets of Baal and Asherah “ate at Jezebel’s table?” Imagine, false prophets had a seat at the queen’s table! What kind of impact would this have had on God’s people living in Israel? Consider Jezebel’s immense power and the fallout from her rule. What are some of the great powers and influences today? As Christ followers, we might not get an honored seat “at the table” in our day. Do you agree or disagree? How does that settle with you? What hope do we have instead?

4. In Thyatira, it was beneficial for workers to join a trade association for advancing their careers and social standing. However, the worship of false gods and immoral sexual practices among these guilds brought tension for the Christians involved. Read vs. 20-21. How might have the church in Thyatira been lured away from obeying Christ? Putting yourself in their place, describe the tension between pursuing social or financial gain at the expense of one’s faith and values? How do you experience this tension today? Where are cultural pressures a real temptation to you, and how does that effect your relationship with Jesus?

5. Read Psalm 2. This is a prophecy about God the Father, giving Jesus His Son, the authority to rule the nations. In it, God even laughs at the kings of the earth and how they plot in vain against the One True God. Remembering the circumstances in Thyatira, and this promise in Psalm 2, re-read the letter’s closing in vs. 26-28. What does Jesus do with His authority to rule? Rather, to whom does He give authority? How does this promise become a hope to the faithful - to those who choose to oppose the “kings of the earth?” Is it worth it, to do His will until the end? Why or why not?

Step Four – Application & Prayer

Take what you've learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week's reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you've learned or anything else on your heart this week.

Step Five – Digging Deeper

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you're learning. Think outside of the box and share a creative, personal, or academic element relevant to this week's lesson. Share a poem or drawing, or take a deep dive into a word study or passage. This is purposefully open-ended to bring something unique to this week's lesson.

NOTES

NOTES

Seven Letters

Sardis – The Dead Church ***Lesson 6 ~ Revelation 3:1-6***

Thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, the ancient city of Sardis was seemingly impregnable, sitting atop a steep hill. Ideally located at the junction of five major roads (including roads to Smyrna and Pergamum), Sardis experienced boundless commercial advantages, with access to gold and other natural resources from nearby valleys. It was well known for its prosperity and self-sufficiency – even an earthquake in 17 AD gave them little pause as they quickly rebuilt. Because Sardians had experienced great wealth for centuries with few threats from the outside world, they had grown both confident and complacent.

To outsiders, the church still appeared vibrant, but in truth, it had become stagnant and slack. It was a dying church. Jesus, out of his great love for them, calls for repentance and a return to what they have received and heard from Him. He also sends a clear warning to be ready for His second coming – time is ticking and there is unfinished business. This letter is more than simply a rebuke, however. Jesus encourages the few who are still “dressed in white,” saying they will receive their reward by persevering in faith.

This week as we look at a church basking in the glory of reputation and past achievements, we will be challenged to do some soul-searching, both collectively and individually. We will ask Jesus to shine His light on the apathy in our hearts and bring us to a place of repentance and renewed vitality.

Step One – Observation

Read through the entire chapter. Using a pen and highlighter, engage with the text. Underline key words and highlight key phrases. Look for repeated words or patterns. Journal your questions, observations and insights in the space on the right.

Revelation 3:1-6

¹“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. ³Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

⁴Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot

out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. ⁶Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Colossians 2:13-15

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Isaiah 38:18-19

¹⁸For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. ¹⁹The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today; parents tell their children about your faithfulness.

Ezekiel 37:1-6

¹The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’ ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

Step Two – Key Verse

Looking back over this week's reading, pick one verse that stands out to you. Write it down below and explain why you chose it. Commit it to memory as your verse for the week.

Step Three –Questions

1. In Revelation 3:1, Jesus gets right to the heart of the issue when He tells the church they are living on the borrowed fumes of past reputation and there is no present vitality. These are sobering words. Read Matthew 23:27-28 where Jesus rebukes the Pharisees in a similar manner. Looking over your own Christian journey, elaborate on times past or present, when these words apply/applied to you. Why do you think Jesus cares so much about the condition of our hearts and not simply appearances?
2. In verse 2, the letter says to strengthen what remains before it dies. But this does beg the question, how exactly do we *do* this? In verse 3, list the three steps Jesus gives us to serve as a roadmap for bringing life back into our faith. Having times of feeling empty, lifeless, and dry are not foreign experiences in our Christian walk. Read Ezekiel 37:1-6 and look closely at the exchange between God and Isaiah, both their *actions* and *words*. What stands out to you and how does the powerful imagery of the Valley of Dry Bones inspire you to pursue spiritual revival and renewal in your life today? With God, we can be conduits of His breath – who could you breathe fresh life into this week?
3. Later in verse 2, Jesus says, “I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.” This would be painful to hear, but it reminds us that it matters how we live. We can easily fall into the trap of believing that we win God's approval through our good deeds, but Scripture tells

us otherwise. Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and Matthew 5:16 and share what you find. We are saved by grace, yet our deeds matter as we are to partner with Jesus in bringing God's kingdom of righteousness here on earth. We all have a role to play. Are there things in your life that you know God is calling you to that feel unfinished? What's keeping you from stepping forward?

4. Reread Colossians 2:13-15 and discuss how the victory over sin and spiritual decay has been won through His death and resurrection. Jesus has taken our sin and nailed it to the cross. How does knowing this give you hope and encouragement to stay in the battle? Read Isaiah 38:18-19. What should be our response to this gift of hope and new life in Christ?

5. Read Revelation 3:5 and Psalm 51:7. The image of being dressed in white is found throughout the Bible, often symbolizing righteousness, purity, and holiness. It is important to remember that *God is the one who makes us pure*. Our job is to remain connected to Him. In ancient Roman times, white clothing also symbolized victory, honor, and citizenship – and even indicated a linking with the gods. People of high status wore white, especially for formal celebrations. Jesus uses this understanding to draw people to Himself in Revelation. Paul Kroll states, “Those clothed in white will feast at the marriage supper of the Lamb in the kingdom of God (*Rev. 19:9*). It will be their day of victory, a time to put on the best of clothing, clean and white.” Journal a bit on this picture and what it stirs in you. Is it difficult to picture yourself dressed in white? If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, there is assurance that you have a place at His banqueting table. How can you be a part of what He is doing to invite others to the table?

Step Four – Application & Prayer

Take what you’ve learned from reading and journaling to the next level – apply it to your own life. How might this week’s reading impact your thinking and actions?

Take some time with the Lord. Seek Him, listen, and write a prayer based on what you’ve learned or anything else on your heart this week.

Step Five – Digging Deeper

Use the bordered space to deepen your connection to what you’re learning. Think outside of the box and share a creative, personal, or academic element relevant to this week’s lesson. Share a poem or drawing, or take a deep dive into a word study or passage. This is purposefully open-ended to bring something unique to this week’s lesson.

NOTES

NOTES