



SEVEN LETTERS

SMALL GROUP GUIDE

Disclaimer: Most questions were drafted by Open AI and edited by our editorial team. The section summaries were adapted from the Wednesdays at Waterstone curriculum, written by Paul Joslin.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Over the next 10 weeks, we are going to spend our time walking through the seven letters of Revelation. As we begin the journey, it's important for us to start with the understanding that the seven letters were written to seven cities, with seven churches, all in the Roman province of Asia. These were real people, in real places, who received a message from Jesus about how they were living, where they were remaining faithful, and where they had compromised.

We often assume that Revelation is primarily about the future, interpreting the times or even helping the church diagnose the culture around them. But the letters of Revelation are interested in helping the church diagnose the church.

Revelation doesn't begin with beasts and battles, but with letters—real words from the risen Jesus to real churches under real pressure. They lived in an empire of distraction, wealth, violence, and compromise.

So do we.

These seven letters in Revelation 2–3 are Jesus’ discipleship curriculum for the church in every age—a vision of resilience: staying faithful when it’s costly, staying loving when it’s easier to fight or withdraw, and staying hopeful when fear feels more comfortable than faith.

Each week, we listen to what the Spirit said then—and what he’s still saying now: Be the Church that stands firm, shines bright, and endures with love until the end.

THE TEN WEEKS

Sep 13, 2026	The Jesus We Forgot	Revelation 1:1–20
Sep 20, 2026	Dear Ephesus: The Church Who Was Right About Everything	Revelation 2:1–7
Sep 27, 2026	Dear Smyrna: The Church Who Held On	Revelation 2:8–11
Oct 4, 2026	Dear Pergamum: The Church Who Compromised	Revelation 2:12–17
Oct 11, 2026	Dear Thyatira: The Church Who Made an Exception	Revelation 2:18–29
Oct 18, 2026	Dear Sardis: The Church Who Fell Asleep	Revelation 3:1–6
Oct 25, 2026	Dear Philadelphia: The Church Who Couldn’t Be Shut Out	Revelation 3:7–13
Nov 1, 2026	Dear Laodicea: The Church Who Needed Nothing	Revelation 3:14–22
Nov 8, 2026	The Lion, the Lamb, and the Throne	Revelation 4–5
Nov 15, 2026	Dear Waterstone	Revelation 2–3

CONTEXT: REAL LETTERS TO REAL PEOPLE

Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation are where that stops being a background fact and becomes the actual content. Seven letters, seven cities, all in the Roman province of Asia, connected by a mail route you could walk in a big circle: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.

Interestingly, according to the trade routes, that is exactly the order a courier would travel to them. Which means, this is not a mystical number sequence. It's a delivery route.

This apocalyptic book, full of visions and multi-headed monsters and lions and lambs, is deeply grounded in the everyday. And here's what should reorder your instincts: before this book shows you a single beast, dragon, or plague, it makes you sit through seven performance reviews.

We tend to think of Revelation as a book about what's wrong with the world. But John's Jesus starts with what's wrong (and right) with the church. The dragon doesn't show up until chapter 12. The mail comes first. This tells you something about the book's priorities. Revelation is not primarily interested in helping the church diagnose the culture or the events of the future; it is interested in helping Jesus diagnose the church—warts and all—and attempt to bring them into deeper alignment with himself.

Ultimately, that's a less marketable book than dragons and beasts and Armageddon, but it's the one we've got.

Seven, in this book, is never just arithmetic—it's the number of completeness. There were more than seven churches in Asia (Colossae, for one, got its own letter from Paul). John picks seven because these seven, together, are a complete portrait.

Which means these letters were never only for their original addressees. Every letter ends with the same line: Let anyone who has ears hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Plural. Everyone is reading everyone else's mail. Ephesus has to sit through the letter to Laodicea, and so do we.

LEADING A LESSON

How this guide works

- Each week's discussion guide follows the text more than the sermon. Hopefully they will flow together, but our primary discussion points are from Scripture, not things the preacher says. The sermons will (hopefully) help supplement the discussions.
- Groups meeting Monday through Saturday will discuss the passage preached the previous Sunday.
- You will not get through all the questions. That is by design. Read them ahead of time, pick a few you want to hit, and follow the group where it goes.
- The CONTEXT section is intended to be read before group. If everyone has not had a chance to read, I don't think you should read it aloud as a lecture, but rather hand pieces of it out as the discussion needs them.

THE PATTERN IN EVERY LETTER

Jesus introduces himself using a piece of the chapter 1 vision, custom-fitted to that church.

Then Jesus gives an "I know" statement. He says things like, "I know your deeds," or "I know your afflictions."

After this, Jesus offers a diagnosis of the church, "This is where you have gone wrong...This is where you lost your way...This is where you need to come back..."

Then there is the instruction: some sort of way for them to correct where they have gone wrong or how to endure the challenges they are facing.

Finally, each letter finishes with Jesus offering a promise to the one who conquers, endures, and remains faithful to him.

ONE THING TO HOLD ONTO

Of the seven churches, the two that get a clean report are the persecuted one and the powerless one.

Interestingly, the churches in real trouble are the impressive ones—the doctrinally rigorous, the well-regarded, the financially secure. If you were touring Asia, you would have guessed the standings were backwards.

But every hard word in chapters 2 and 3 is spoken by Jesus who is standing among the lampstands (churches), holding them in his hand. Jesus critiques the church the way you critique something you refuse to give up on because you love them.

He knows Ephesus's toil and Thyatira's growth and Philadelphia's little strength before he says one word about what's wrong and what they need to correct. While the reviews are thorough and challenging, it all comes from a love that is just as deep.

Keep that front and center in your group. Conviction and condemnation are not the same thing. Jesus is not condemning these churches, he is correcting them.

And that means his desire is the same for us.

WEEK ONE

THE JESUS WE FORGOT

CONTEXT

Before John records the letters, he shows us who's writing them. And this is where a lot of readers get their first jolt because the Jesus of Revelation 1 does not look like the Jesus from the flannel graph board. (Mandatory 90's reference—if you didn't read Revelation through a flannel graph board, did you even read Revelation?)

John is on Patmos, "in the Spirit on the Lord's day," when he hears a voice like a trumpet and turns around to see and hear every one of his first hearers would have sat up: one like a son of man.

That title is not generic phrase. John is quoting Daniel 7 almost verbatim.

In Daniel 7, there is a mysterious figure who approaches God's throne and receives an everlasting kingdom. John is telling you, in the first chapter, that the person about to dictate these letters to these churches is the rightful ruler of all of history.

Then comes the description, of Jesus and an important thing for us to understand is that these images are meant to be recognized, not deciphered. If you try to draw Revelation 1, you get a nightmare image. But if you try to hear it with the Old Testament lens over your eyes, you get a theology lesson.

Here is the lesson of Jesus' description:

- A long robe with a golden sash, which is the clothing of a priest. Jesus is depicted as a priest, ministering to his churches.
- Hair white like wool, which is borrowed directly from Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days (i.e. God himself). Now, that description of God, is applied to Jesus without apology or explanation—Jesus is one with the Father.
- Eyes like flames of fire. This is where the nightmare begins. If Jesus has flaming eyeballs, that's not comforting, that's horrific. But eyes like flames—has a meaning—he sees everything. Every church, as we're about to find out, gets the words I know near the top of its letter. Nothing in Ephesus or Sardis or Laodicea is hidden, which is either comforting or terrifying depending on your week. Jesus sees all.
- A voice like many waters goes back to Ezekiel's description of the voice of God. If you've stood near a real waterfall, you know: it's not just that the waterfall is loud, it's that it's underneath everything else. It overwhelms everything else.

- A sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth. Pause. This one is important because it will matter for the whole book...

First, we must admit the obvious: as an image, this is ridiculous. Try to picture it literally and you get Jesus with a Roman short sword clenched in his teeth like a pirate, which is not a Jesus anyone can take seriously. Other artists have tried to depict this image as the hilt between Jesus' teeth. Maybe more effective at keeping the pointy end away from you, but not effective as far as sword fighting goes.

Artists across the centuries have attempted to paint this verse, and the results mostly prove the point from last week: these images are meant to be recognized, not sketched.

So what are we supposed to recognize? Ask a more useful question: what good is a sword in someone's mouth? None, if it's a sword. Everything, if it's a symbol. John is stacking two prophecies from Isaiah. In one, the coming King strikes the earth "with the rod of his mouth" and slays the wicked "with the breath of his lips." In the other, the Servant of the Lord says God made his mouth "like a sharpened sword." Put them together and the picture snaps into focus: the sword isn't in his mouth because John couldn't think of a better place to put it, or because his hands are full of flaming laser cannons; the sword is his mouth. Jesus's weapon is his word.

Jesus's sword comes out of his mouth: he speaks, and things are cut open. Truth is told. Verdicts land. Reality gets divided from pretense (which is, come to think of it, exactly what's about to happen to seven churches). The same word that comforts Smyrna filets Sardis. Two edges.

- The final image is of this Son of Man standing among seven golden lampstands, holding seven stars. Mercifully, John interprets this one for us: the lampstands are the churches. Jesus is not watching them from orbit—they are in his hands. He is holding the churches, meaning he is among them, walking the aisles, close enough to know the wool trade and the trade guilds and the name of the woman teaching in Thyatira.

Even if some of the imagery is meant to be symbolic, the image of Jesus is still no less worthy of awe: it even makes John fall down like a dead man in response. This is the disciple whom tradition says leaned against Jesus at the Last Supper. The beloved disciple, “whom Jesus loved.” Whatever domesticated Jesus he was carrying in his heart, it did not survive the vision.

And what does this cosmic, blazing, Daniel chapter 7 figure do with his terrifying authority? He puts his hand on his old friend and says, “Do not be afraid.” Then he dictates letters to churches. The one who holds the keys of Death and Hades now turns his attention to your congregation’s love life, finances, and lukewarm water.

If your group is newer, or you haven't spent much time together in a while, spend some time getting reconnected. The opening questions are designed to help you open up and share.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- When you were growing up, what was your mental picture of Jesus? Where do you think that picture came from (church, family, movies, Sunday school, artwork, somewhere else)?
- If you had to describe the "Sunday school Jesus" you grew up envisioning in three words, what would they be?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 1:1-20

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Revelation 1:1 begins, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” The Greek word apokalypsis means an unveiling, uncovering, or revealing. What does John say is being revealed in this chapter—and how might that change the way we approach Revelation if we think of it as a book that hides things or makes them harder to understand?
2. In verses 5–6, John puts several truths about Jesus right next to each other: Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” he “loves us,” and he “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” Why do you think John wants his readers to hold Jesus’ authority, love, and sacrifice together? What happens when we emphasize one of those qualities while neglecting the others?
3. Verse 7 says that when Jesus comes, “all peoples on earth will mourn because of him.” Why would the appearing of the rightful King produce mourning rather than celebration for some people? What does this tell us about the difference between Jesus being comforting and Jesus being Lord?
4. Read John’s description of Jesus in verses 12–16 slowly. What details stand out to you most? Rather than trying to picture every image literally, what do these images communicate about who Jesus is—his authority, holiness, knowledge, presence, and the power of his Word?

5. John knew Jesus personally, yet when he sees the risen Jesus in this vision, he falls at his feet “as though dead.” What do you think John suddenly understands or experiences about Jesus in this moment? What might John’s response expose about the ways we can become overly familiar with or domesticate Jesus?
6. In verses 17–18, Jesus responds to John’s fear by saying, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One... and I hold the keys of death and Hades.” Why is Jesus’ identity the answer to John’s fear? When Jesus says, “I am,” “I was dead,” “I am alive forever,” and “I hold the keys,” what claims is he making about himself?
7. Jesus explains that the seven lampstands are the seven churches and the seven stars are their angels or messengers. What does the image of Jesus standing among the lampstands and holding the stars communicate about his relationship to his churches? What might it mean for a church to really believe that Jesus is not distant, but present and attentive?
8. Revelation was written to seven actual churches in seven actual cities, facing real pressures, temptations, compromises, and suffering. As we begin these seven letters, what would change if we approached them not by asking, “What does this predict?” but, “What does Jesus see in his Church—and what might he see in us?”

APPLICATION

- What is one way your picture of Jesus needs to expand or be corrected after reading Revelation 1?
- If Jesus truly sees and knows his Church, what is one way you want to be more aware of his presence this week?
- What is one small way you could live differently this week if you really believed Jesus is present, attentive, and King of the cosmos?

PRAYER

Spend some time praying for one another and ask that the Holy Spirit would enlarge, not shrink, your picture of Jesus. Also, if you're feeling bold, pray that the group would be able to hear hard things from someone who loves them.

WEEK TWO

DEAR EPHESUS: THE CHURCH WHO WAS RIGHT
ABOUT EVERYTHING

CONTEXT

Jesus writes a letter to the church in Ephesus and the main point is that they tend to be right about everything, but wrong about the matters of love.

Ephesus is a big city—and this would have been a flagship church of the ancient world. Jesus says they've tested false apostles and passed with honors. Their doctrine is airtight. They are theologians who study and know the truth. They are convinced their view of the world, Jesus and church is the right way.

And Jesus says they are still missing something deeply important: they have abandoned the love they had at first.

As it turns out, you can defend the faith so vigilantly that you forget why you hold the faith in the first place. The church that guarded the truth lost the thing the truth is for.

Jesus, who walks among the lampstands, threatens to remove their lampstand.

Jesus doesn't say, "Your church might shrink," or "I won't bless your programs anymore." The lampstand represents the church as a community that bears the presence and witness of Jesus in the world. Jesus walks among the lampstands in Revelation 1:12-13. The churches are meant to shine his light.

So removing the lampstand likely means, "You may continue existing as an institution, but you will no longer function as a faithful representative of me."

It's important to remember that these letters are directed corporately to the church—so we don't read this as a threat that individual Christians are going to lose their salvation.

Jesus is evaluating whether this congregation will continue to have a legitimate place among his lampstands, because they no longer resemble his heart as a community.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- Think of something that's been in your life for a long time—a job, friendship, hobby, marriage, church, spiritual practice. Have you ever had the experience of still doing all the right things while realizing your heart wasn't really in it anymore?
- When you hear the phrase "first love," what comes to mind? What's the difference between loving someone and simply being faithful to your responsibilities toward them?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 1:1-20

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as the one who “holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” Based on Revelation 1:20, the lampstands represent the churches. Why do you think Jesus reminds the Ephesian church that he is walking among them before he says anything about their behavior? What does this image communicate about how closely Jesus knows and watches over his Church?
2. In verses 2-3, Jesus gives the Ephesian church a remarkable list of commendations: their hard work, perseverance, rejection of wicked people, discernment of false apostles, endurance, and refusal to grow weary. If you only had these verses, what kind of church would you assume Ephesus was? Which of these qualities would most churches today be proud to have?
3. Then verse 4 turns sharply: “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.” Why is this criticism so surprising after everything Jesus has just praised? What do you think Jesus means by their “first love”—love for Jesus, love for one another, love for outsiders, or some combination of these? How might those loves be connected?

4. The Ephesian church appears to have good theology, strong discernment, hard work, and perseverance—but Jesus still says something essential is missing. What does that tell us about Jesus' definition of a healthy church? How can commitment to truth and resistance to false teaching actually become disconnected from love?
5. In verse 5, Jesus gives them three commands: "Remember... repent... and do the things you did at first." Why do you think renewal begins with remembering? What might repentance look like for a church whose problem is not obvious immorality or false doctrine, but a heart that has grown cold?
6. In verse 6, Jesus again praises the Ephesians because they "hate the practices of the Nicolaitans," which Jesus says he also hates. Why is it important that Jesus does not tell them to become less discerning or less committed to truth? How does this letter challenge the idea that churches have to choose between truth and love?
8. Jesus ends by saying, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches," and promises the victorious the right to eat from "the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." Why do you think a warning about lost love ends with an image from Eden and the promise of restored life with God? As you listen to this letter as something the Spirit might say to the church today, where do you hear encouragement—and where do you hear warning?

APPLICATION

- Where in your relationship with Jesus are you most tempted to substitute activity, knowledge, or responsibility for love?
- Is there anything you are still doing faithfully for Jesus that you may no longer be doing with Jesus?
- Jesus tells Ephesus to remember, repent, and return. Which of those three words feels most important for you right now?

PRAYER

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any place where love has quietly been replaced by routine, duty, cynicism, or simply going through the motions.

Pray for Waterstone as well—that we would never have to choose between truth and love, but would become a community that is deeply faithful to Jesus, deeply in love with Jesus, and increasingly characterized by his love for one another and for the world.

WEEK THREE

DEAR SMYRNA: THE CHURCH WHO HELD ON

CONTEXT

The tone of the letter for the church in Smyrna is quite different. As a whole, they are poor, suffering, and Jesus seems to find them near flawless. They are one of only two churches that receive no correction.

For context, Smyrna is being slandered in public spaces, some of their people are in danger of imprisonment, and Jesus, introducing himself as the one who died and came to life, tells them the truth without any dressing up: hold fast, because it may get worse before it gets better.

He calls them to be faithful unto death. And what's interesting is that he doesn't promise to rescue them. Instead, he promises resurrection. To a suffering church, Jesus doesn't offer an exit but offers them a crown and calls them what nobody else would: rich.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- When life gets hard, what explanation are you most tempted to reach for first: "I did something wrong," "God is disappointed with me," "This is just bad luck," "God must be teaching me something," or something else?
- Have you ever gone through a season where you were doing the right thing and life still got harder? How did that affect the way you thought about God?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 2:8-11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." Why do you think this is the particular description of Jesus that the suffering church in Smyrna needs to hear? How does Jesus' own death and resurrection shape the way they are supposed to understand their suffering?

2. In verse 9, Jesus says, “I know your afflictions and your poverty —yet you are rich!” What does Jesus see in Smyrna that the surrounding culture might not see? How does his definition of wealth challenge the ways we normally measure whether a person or a church is doing well?
3. Smyrna is suffering despite apparently being deeply faithful to Jesus. What assumptions about suffering does this letter confront? Why is it dangerous to assume that hardship is always evidence of weak faith, disobedience, or God’s displeasure?
4. Jesus tells them, “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer,” but then immediately warns that some of them will be imprisoned and tested. Why do you think Jesus responds to their fear by telling them the truth rather than promising immediate rescue? What is the difference between Jesus promising his presence in suffering and promising protection from suffering?
5. Jesus says their testing will last “ten days.” Whether we understand that number literally or symbolically, the suffering is presented as real but limited. Why might it matter for Smyrna to know that evil does not have unlimited power over them? How can knowing that suffering has boundaries change the way we endure it?

6. Jesus tells them, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.” What kind of faithfulness is Jesus asking for here? How is this different from a version of Christianity that assumes faithfulness should always lead to comfort, success, health, or escape from hardship?
7. Jesus promises that, “...the one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.” Why is resurrection hope such an important promise to people who may actually lose their lives? What does this reveal about what Jesus considers the ultimate danger—and the ultimate victory?
8. Smyrna receives no correction from Jesus, yet from the outside they might have looked like one of the least successful churches: poor, slandered, vulnerable, and suffering. If Jesus evaluated churches differently than we often do, what might we be tempted to call “failure” that Jesus might call faithfulness? And what might we call “success” that Jesus might not value nearly as much?

APPLICATION

- Where are you most tempted to interpret hardship as evidence that God has forgotten or abandoned you, or is disappointed with you?
- What would it look like for you to believe Jesus' words, "I know," in the middle of something difficult you are facing right now?
- Smyrna is not promised an immediate way out; they are called to remain faithful. What is one area of your life where faithfulness may matter more right now than fixing the situation?

PRAYER

Spend some time praying for anyone in the group who is walking through suffering, uncertainty, loss, opposition, or disappointment. Ask the Holy Spirit to help the group resist the assumption that hardship means God is absent, angry, or disappointed.

Pray for the kind of faith Jesus calls for in Smyrna: a faith that does not depend on comfort, success, or immediate rescue, but trusts the One who died and came to life again.

And ask Jesus to give you his perspective—to see what he calls rich, to value what he calls faithful, and to hold onto resurrection hope even when circumstances do not change.

WEEK FOUR

PERGAMUM: THE CHURCH WHO COMPROMISED

CONTEXT

Pergamum is ground zero for the imperial cult—the worship of Caesar as a god. Jesus calls it the place "where Satan's throne is," which is a bold thing for John to put in writing since he is already in exile for being a threat to the empire.

The church has stood firm against the pressure from the outside. Someone named Antipas has already died for the faith, and Jesus commends them for holding fast even in the face of persecution and death. But while the church is standing firm on the outside, compromise is taking root on the inside. They are tolerating those who hold to the teaching of Balaam, the Old Testament's patron prophet of "if you can't beat them, assimilate to them."

A quick footnote: who were the Nicolaitans? They show up twice in the letters, once when Ephesus is commended for hating their works, and then again when Pergamum is rebuked for tolerating their teaching. There's even a likely wordplay: "Balaam" in Hebrew can be read as "he destroys the people," and "Nicolaitans" in Greek breaks down to "conquer the people." So John may be making the same accusation in two different languages.

In light of that, the Nicolaitans were likely a group within the churches who believed you could accommodate the culture around you without compromising your faith—for instance, you could attend the feasts, eat the idol meat, participate in the civic-religious life of a Roman city, and still follow Jesus. They were likely not enemies of the church, but members of it with a theology flexible enough to make themselves comfortable in the empire.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- Which do you think is harder to recognize in yourself: outright rebellion or gradual compromise? Why?
- Have you ever changed your behavior, language, or convictions because it was easier to fit into the environment around you? What made that pressure difficult to resist?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 2:12–17

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as “him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” Later he warns that he will fight against false teaching “with the sword of my mouth.” What does this image communicate about the authority of Jesus’ Word? Why might this particular church need to be reminded that Jesus—not Rome, Caesar, or the surrounding culture—has the final word?
2. Jesus says Pergamum lives “where Satan has his throne,” yet he immediately praises them: “You remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me.” What kind of pressure do you imagine these believers were living under? What does their faithfulness teach us about following Jesus in an environment that may be hostile to Christian allegiance?
3. Jesus specifically remembers Antipas, “my faithful witness,” who was killed for his faith. What does it tell us about Jesus that he knows Antipas by name and calls him faithful? How might this have encouraged a church living in fear of persecution or death?
4. After praising their courage, Jesus says, “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you.” Some within the church are holding to the teaching of Balaam, who led Israel toward idolatry and sexual immorality. Why is this warning so striking after the church has already demonstrated such extraordinary courage? What does it tell us about the possibility of being faithful in one area while compromising in another?

5. The story of Balaam points back to Israel's temptation to assimilate to the surrounding culture rather than simply abandon God outright. What is the difference between rejecting Jesus and slowly reshaping discipleship so that following Jesus becomes compatible with whatever the surrounding culture already values? Why might the second be harder to notice?
6. Jesus also rebukes Pergamum for tolerating the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Ephesus was praised for rejecting their practices, while Pergamum is criticized for allowing their teaching to remain. What does the word "tolerate" suggest about the responsibility of a Christian community when harmful teaching develops inside the church? How can a church practice grace and patience without becoming indifferent to teaching that leads people away from Jesus?
7. The greatest danger to Pergamum does not seem to be the persecution coming from outside the church, but compromise growing inside it. Why can comfort and accommodation sometimes be more spiritually dangerous than outright opposition? Where do you think Christians today are most tempted to make following Jesus easier, safer, or more socially acceptable by quietly adjusting what faithfulness requires?
8. Jesus ends with two mysterious promises: "hidden manna" and "a white stone with a new name written on it." Whatever the precise symbolism, both images communicate belonging, provision, and reward from Jesus. How do these promises contrast with what Pergamum's culture was offering them? What might change if Christians were convinced that what Jesus offers is ultimately better than whatever they might gain through compromise?

APPLICATION

- Where are you most tempted to ask, “How much can I participate in this and still be a Christian?” instead of, “What would faithfulness to Jesus look like here?”
- Is there an area of your life where your convictions have gradually become shaped more by convenience, comfort, success, approval, or the surrounding culture rather than by Jesus?
- Pergamum was willing to die for Jesus publicly while still compromising with its culture privately. What is one area where you need the Holy Spirit to make you more fully faithful—not just visibly Christian?

PRAYER

Ask the Holy Spirit to expose compromises that may have become so normal that they no longer feel like compromise.

Share where some areas of faithfulness and thank Jesus for the places where he sees genuine courage, and endurance in your lives.

Pray for wisdom to know the difference between engaging your culture with grace and assimilating into it.

And ask Jesus to make you the kind of people who trust that what he provides is better than whatever compromise promises—people who remain faithful not only when following Jesus is costly, but also when compromise would make life easier.

WEEK FIVE

THYATIRA: THE CHURCH WHO MADE AN EXCEPTION

CONTEXT

Thyatira was the least impressive of the seven cities. It was primarily a blue-collar town whose economy ran on trade guilds: dyers, wool workers, bronze-smiths, bakers. (For context, Lydia, the purple-cloth dealer of Acts 16, was from here.) The trade guilds weren't just for networking; they were how you made a living. And every guild had a patron god, which meant guild banquets were often held in temples with sacrificed meat, imperial toasts, and entertainment that likely wouldn't be kosher even in a place like Hollywood.

If someone opted out of the feast, they weren't just skipping a party—they were risking their livelihood. The Christian bronze-smith faced a question daily: Do I attend this feast, or do I risk my ability to make a living? Do I participate, or do I lose my place in the guild?

Into that pressure we get introduced to a prophetess with real standing in the church. "Jezebel" isn't her actual name—it's Jesus's nickname, invoking the queen who normalized idolatry from inside Israel. Jezebel may not have even been an individual but a stand-in for a group of teachers promoting a particular ideology.

Their teaching was likely sophisticated and not openly antithetical to the ways of Jesus. We can imagine that they might have believed that idols aren't real, which would mean the feasts were empty rituals, and mature believers could handle pagan spaces without being spiritually stained by them. Their beliefs might have sounded a lot more like grace and tolerance, which would have been enticing for someone who wanted to compromise in order to keep their job.

This is why the letter opens the way it does. Each letter begins with Jesus introducing himself through a piece of the chapter 1 vision, fitted to that church's situation. Thyatira gets a callback to the Son of God, whose eyes are like a flame of fire. And that's not accidental. Jezebel's theology says that what happens at a guild dinner doesn't really matter. Jesus says otherwise simply by telling them who he is: his eyes see it all. There is no such thing as a private compromise that doesn't matter.

But Jesus also "gave her time to repent." Judgment came only after patience she didn't use. And to the believers who never bought her teaching, he's remarkably gentle: "I do not lay on you any other burden."

Then the detail that should mess with our metrics: Thyatira was growing. Their latest works exceed their first, which is the exact opposite of Ephesus. The growth and the compromise were happening under the same roof.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- Have you ever made an exception to one of your convictions because the cost of holding to it felt especially high? What made the exception feel reasonable at the time?
- Which is harder for you personally: knowing what is right, or doing what is right, when obedience could cost you something significant?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 2:18-29

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as “the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.” What do these images communicate about Jesus? Why might a church tempted to believe that certain areas of life “don’t really matter” need to encounter Jesus as the one who sees clearly and judges rightly?

2. Before Jesus corrects Thyatira, he praises them: "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first." What stands out to you about this list? How is Thyatira different from Ephesus, whose later works had diminished? What does this tell us about the possibility of genuine spiritual growth and serious compromise existing in the same church at the same time?
3. Jesus says, "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel." Why do you think Jesus reaches back to the Old Testament figure of Jezebel to describe what is happening in Thyatira? What did Jezebel represent in Israel's story, and how does that help us understand the danger Jesus sees here?
4. For Christians in Thyatira, participation in trade-guild life may have affected their ability to work, earn money, and provide for their families. How does that economic pressure change the way you hear this letter? Why are compromises especially tempting when obedience threatens something genuinely important rather than something trivial?
5. The teaching Jesus condemns likely gave believers a rationale for participating in practices connected with idolatry and sexual immorality. Why are the most dangerous compromises often the ones we can give a sophisticated theological explanation for? How can we tell the difference between faithfully applying grace and simply finding religious language for something we already want to do?

6. Jesus says, "I have given her time to repent, but she is unwilling." What does this reveal about the character of Jesus even in a passage containing severe judgment? What is the difference between God being patient with sin and God being indifferent toward it?
7. Jesus tells the rest of the church, "I will not impose any other burden on you, except to hold on to what you have until I come." What do you notice about Jesus' tone toward believers who have resisted this teaching? Why might "hold on" be exactly the word people need when faithfulness is costly, exhausting, and economically inconvenient?
8. Jesus says he is the one "who searches hearts and minds" and promises to repay each person according to their deeds. He then promises the faithful "authority over the nations" and "the morning star." How do these promises reverse the situation in Thyatira? What are these believers being asked to surrender now, and what does Jesus promise them instead?

APPLICATION

- Where are you most tempted to make an exception to following Jesus because obedience would cost you comfort, income, opportunity, approval, a relationship, or something else you value?
- Is there an area where you have started asking, “How can I justify this?” rather than, “What does faithfulness to Jesus require?”
- Jesus tells the faithful in Thyatira simply to “hold on.” Is there an area of your life where you do not need a new strategy as much as you need the courage to keep doing what is faithful?

PRAYER

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any exceptions that have slowly become compromises—and any compromises that you have learned to explain away.

Thank Jesus for the places where he sees real love, faith, service, perseverance, and growth in your lives and in your church, name some of them.

Pray for people whose faithfulness to Jesus carries a real cost in their work, relationships, finances, or reputation.

Ask Jesus to give you the courage to hold on—trusting that the One whose eyes see everything is also the One who patiently calls people to repentance and promises something far greater than whatever compromise can offer.

WEEK SIX

DEAR SARDIS: THE CHURCH WHO FELL ASLEEP

CONTEXT

The city of Sardis was famous for being the city that fell asleep on watch. Sardis was situated on top of a bluff and was seen by many as impregnable. No one would be able to breach its walls. Until one day, they were so over confident, their enemies did breach their walls.

And then it happened a second time.

So the church famous for falling asleep on watch, gets the church that fell asleep in the pews. They had a reputation of being alive. But their reality was they were “dead.” Jesus calls them to “wake up, and strengthen what remains.”

This is a church mid-death, not dead (or a church that is “mostly dead”). As we have mentioned, “wake up” would have landed in Sardis like a bucket of ice water because it's the one thing everyone knew about their city. Jesus even borrows the imagery—if you will not wake up, I will come like a thief.

Here's the chilling part: there's no persecution in this letter. No slander, no Satan's throne, no Jezebel. Nothing was attacking Sardis, and that's actually the diagnosis.

The church posed so little threat that the darkness didn't bother with it. Apparently, a church can die and nobody sends flowers, because people don't even notice. They keep attending, and the parking lot is full, but there is no life.

And yet, it does not fall into despair. Jesus says there are a few in Sardis who "have not soiled their garments." There is a remnant of people who are remaining faithful, and they will walk with him in white. The letter ends with hope and suggests that even in the sleeping city, there are some who are still awake.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- Have you ever had something in your life that looked healthy from the outside but was actually struggling underneath the surface?
- Which do you think is more dangerous spiritually: obvious crisis or slow drift? Why?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 3:1–6

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as the one “who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” Then he immediately says, “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” Why do you think Jesus begins by reminding Sardis that he sees and knows the church? What is the difference between having a reputation for spiritual life and actually being spiritually alive?
2. Sardis apparently looked healthy enough that others believed it was alive. What kinds of things can make a church appear spiritually healthy—attendance, activity, programs, reputation, history, influence—without necessarily revealing what is happening underneath? What do you think Jesus is measuring that people might miss?
3. Jesus says, “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.” What does this tell us about Sardis? Is the church completely dead, or is there still something worth rescuing? What does the phrase “strengthen what remains” suggest about how Jesus responds to a church in serious decline?
4. The command to “wake up” would have carried special weight in Sardis because the city had famously fallen after failing to keep watch. Jesus then warns, “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief.” Why do you think Jesus uses the city’s own history to confront the church? What might spiritual watchfulness actually look like for a Christian community?

5. Unlike several of the other churches, Sardis is not described as facing persecution, false teaching, or significant outside opposition. What might the absence of conflict tell us about the condition of this church? Is it possible for comfort and lack of resistance to make spiritual sleep easier to miss?
6. Jesus tells them to “remember what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent.” Why does renewal so often involve remembering before it involves doing something new? What might Sardis need to remember about the gospel, their calling, or the Jesus they once followed?
7. Jesus says, “Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes.” Why is this small remnant so important in an otherwise severe letter? What does it tell us about Jesus’ ability to see individual faithfulness even when the larger community is drifting?
8. Jesus promises that the faithful will “walk with me, dressed in white,” and that their names will be acknowledged before the Father and the angels. How does this ending reshape the tone of the whole letter? What hope does Jesus offer to a church that seems nearly dead—and what does that tell us about whether spiritual decline is ever beyond repentance?

APPLICATION

- Is there any area of your spiritual life where your reputation is stronger than your reality?
- Where are you most tempted to coast on past faithfulness, past growth, or past experiences with God instead of remaining awake and attentive now?
- Jesus says, “Strengthen what remains.” What is one area of spiritual life that is still present in you but needs attention before it fades further?

PRAYER

Ask Jesus to show you where you may be spiritually asleep without realizing it.

Pray for the courage to see yourself and your church as Jesus sees you—not merely according to reputation, activity, or appearance.

Ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen what remains: faith, prayer, love, obedience, hunger for God, and attentiveness to his presence.

Thank Jesus that even in a church close to death, he still sees the faithful, still calls people to wake up, and still offers the possibility of renewal.

WEEK SEVEN

TO THE CHURCH IN PHILADELPHIA

CONTEXT

Philadelphia is the church with the least going for it and the only other church that doesn't receive any correction. The town of Philadelphia was small, unimpressive, and the church matched that same energy (sorry Eagles fans!).

Jesus says it plainly: "I know you have little strength." You don't have wealth like Laodicea or a reputation like Sardis. You have very little social or political standing. The followers of Jesus in Philadelphia had been excluded from the local synagogue community, which in a first-century city meant losing more than a place of worship. The synagogue was also a center of community, relationships, and social belonging. Being pushed out meant losing their network, sense of belonging, and the protection that came with being part of an established religious community recognized by the Roman world. A door had been shut in their faces, and everyone knew it. In addition, Philadelphia had a deeper, physical instability underneath: earthquakes. The city sat on a fault line that was so active that after the great quake of AD 17, many residents simply stopped trusting the buildings and lived outside the walls. Both physically and figuratively, this was a town where nothing stayed standing.

So listen to how Jesus introduces himself to this church: who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. The synagogue shut a door, but Jesus holds the key to a better one. I have set before you an open door that no one can shut. And then the promise, tuned precisely to a city of falling buildings: the one who conquers, I will make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never go out of it. A pillar was a symbol of stability and permanence in the ancient world—in a temple that doesn't crumble, with a permanence no fault line can touch.

Plus, Jesus promises them a new name, which for people whose community had rejected them, would have been a big deal.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- Have you ever been in a season where you felt like you didn't have much strength left, but you still knew you needed to keep going?
- Which is harder for you: starting something with courage or staying faithful when you feel small, tired, or overlooked?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 3:7–13

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as “the Holy and True One, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.” What do these titles communicate about Jesus’ authority? Why might a small and vulnerable church especially need to hear that their future is not controlled by the people or powers around them?
2. Jesus says, “I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” What do you think the “open door” might represent—mission, access to God’s kingdom, opportunity for faithful witness, or something else? Whatever its precise meaning, what does Jesus want this church to know about who determines their opportunities?
3. Jesus says, “I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” Why is that such a significant compliment? What does this tell us about the difference between being powerful and being faithful?
4. Philadelphia appears to be facing opposition and rejection from people who claim religious authority over them. Jesus responds by affirming that he loves this church and will ultimately vindicate them. Why does it matter that Jesus does not merely tell them to ignore rejection, but promises that the truth about who belongs to him will eventually be made clear?

5. In verse 10, Jesus says, "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you." What is the relationship between their keeping Jesus' word and Jesus keeping them? How is this different from the idea that faithful Christians are simply strong enough to survive on their own?
6. Jesus says, "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." What does "hold on" look like for a church that already feels weak? Why might the greatest temptation in a season like this be not dramatic rebellion, but simply letting go?
7. Jesus promises the victorious person will become "a pillar in the temple of my God" and will never again leave it. Philadelphia was a city familiar with instability and displacement. What does the image of becoming a permanent pillar communicate about security, belonging, and permanence in God's presence?
8. Jesus also promises to write on them the name of God, the name of God's city, and his own new name. What do these names communicate about identity and belonging? How might this promise speak to people whose status, legitimacy, or place in the community had been questioned by others?

APPLICATION

- Where in your life do you currently feel like you have “little strength”?
- Are you tempted to believe that your lack of strength means God cannot use you? What does this letter say instead?
- Jesus tells Philadelphia simply to “hold on.” What is one thing you already know Jesus has asked of you that you need to keep doing faithfully?

PRAYER

Thank Jesus that he does not measure faithfulness by size, influence, strength, or visibility.

Pray for anyone in your group who feels tired, weak, overlooked, or discouraged (share if that’s you!)

Ask the Holy Spirit for the endurance to keep Jesus’ word and refuse to deny his name, even when faithfulness feels unimpressive.

Pray that you would trust the One who opens doors no one can shut, keeps those who keep his word, and gives his people a permanent place in his presence.

WEEK EIGHT

LAODICEA: THE CHURCH WHO NEEDED NOTHING

CONTEXT

Laodicea was a banking hub at a crossroads of trade routes. It was famous for its glossy black wool and a medical school known for its eye salve. When an earthquake leveled the city around AD 60, Laodicea did something so on-brand that the Roman historian Tacitus wrote it down: they refused imperial relief funds and rebuilt with their own cash.

No handouts from the government, please. Republicans everywhere rejoice.

The city had exactly one embarrassing flaw: the water. Hierapolis, six miles away, had hot mineral springs which were therapeutic and useful for healing. Colossae, also not too far from Laodicea, had cold, fresh mountain water: also refreshing and useful.

Laodicea's water arrived by aqueduct: lukewarm, laden with minerals, and famously nauseating.

Jesus goes straight for it: you are neither hot nor cold...because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth. The point isn't "hot = on fire for God, cold = spiritually dead."

Both hot and cold water are good in this image. The point is uselessness verses usefulness. Laodicea's faith did nothing, healed nothing, refreshed no one. It just sat in the pipe. Lukewarm.

Then the audit: you say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing—and Jesus flips every suburban church impulse on its head. The banking town is poor. The wool town is naked. The eye-salve town is blind. He advises them to buy gold, garments, and salve from him instead—because it actually has value.

And then the line we've sentimentalized onto evangelism posters and coffee mugs and ill-advised gospel pamphlets: behold, I stand at the door and knock.

This is not Jesus knocking on the unbeliever's heart. This is Jesus outside his own church, locked out of the one place his name is on the sign, asking someone—anyone—to hear his voice and let him in for dinner.

The comfortable church didn't lose Jesus in a crisis, it just stopped noticing he'd stepped outside the sanctuary.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- What is something you own or use that looks impressive but is actually pretty useless?
- Which tends to make you more aware of your need for God: seasons when life is difficult or seasons when everything is going well? Why?

THE TEXT

- Read Revelation 3:14-22

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jesus introduces himself as “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” Laodicea has a very confident assessment of itself, but Jesus sees the church very differently. Why might Jesus emphasize that he is the “faithful and true witness” before giving his diagnosis? Whose assessment of a church ultimately matters?
2. Jesus says, “You are neither cold nor hot...because you are lukewarm, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” Hot and cold water can both be useful—hot water heals and soothes, cold water refreshes—but lukewarm water does neither. If that is the image Jesus is drawing from, what is wrong with Laodicea’s faith? What might a Christian life look like that exists but no longer heals, refreshes, or serves any real kingdom purpose.

3. Laodicea says, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." Jesus responds, "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." What is most unsettling about the phrase "you do not realize"? How can material comfort, success, or self-sufficiency make spiritual poverty especially difficult to recognize?
4. Laodicea was known for wealth, black wool, and medicine associated with treatment of the eyes. Jesus tells them they need gold from him, white clothes from him, and salve so they can see. What is Jesus communicating by taking the things their city was proud of and telling them they actually lack them? Where are we most tempted to look for security, identity, or adequacy somewhere other than Jesus?
5. Verse 19 changes the tone: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." Why is that line important after such a severe diagnosis? What does it tell us about the motivation behind Jesus' confrontation? How is loving correction different from rejection or condemnation?
6. Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock." In context, these words are addressed to a church, not primarily to people outside the Christian faith. What is disturbing about the picture of Jesus standing outside a church that bears his name? How could a church continue its religious activity while gradually pushing Jesus to the margins?

7. Jesus continues, “If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person.” After rebuke, discipline, and the threat of being spit out, Jesus offers a meal. What does this image tell us about what Jesus actually wants from Laodicea? What does it reveal about repentance—not simply as feeling guilty, but as restored communion with Jesus?

8. Jesus ends by promising the victorious one a place “with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.” How does this promise contrast with everything Laodicea thought made them secure and significant? Looking back across all seven churches, what have these letters taught us about what Jesus considers a faithful and successful church?

APPLICATION

- Where are you most tempted to say, even without words, “I don’t really need anything from Jesus right now”?
- Is there an area of your life where comfort, competence, money, success, routine, or religious activity has made it easier to operate without actively depending on Jesus?
- If Jesus is not merely asking Laodicea to try harder, but inviting them back to the table with him, what would opening the door to Jesus look like for you this week?

PRAYER

Thank Jesus that his correction comes from love: “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.”

Ask the Holy Spirit to expose places of self-sufficiency—especially the places where you may not even realize how much you need Jesus.

Pray for your church, that activity, resources, reputation, programs, or success would never become substitutes for the presence of Jesus.

And finish by simply welcoming Jesus again: asking him to come near, restore fellowship, open your eyes, and make your lives useful for his kingdom.

Pray that we, the people of Waterstone would become people who know that having Jesus is infinitely better than simply having enough.

WEEK NINE

THE LION, THE LAMB AND THE THRONE

CONTEXT

In Revelation 4 and 5, John moves from the closed door imagery of Philadelphia (the one that kept the Christians from the synagauge) and the closed door of Laodicea (the one that was keeping Jesus out) and moves to a door standing open to heaven.

John is invited to come through the door and sees the heavenly throne room. It's a magnificent portrait, full of Old Testament rentals from the prophets.

The scene in chapter four revolves around the throne in heaven: God's appearance, the elders encircling thee throne, the most powerful creatures in all of creation worshiping God non-stop singing: Holy, Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty who was, and is, and is to come."

As this takes place the elders fall down and offer their crowns to God day and night singing of his worthiness over all creation. The scene then shifts in Revelation 5: John sees God holding a scroll in his right hand an an angel asking the question—Who is worthy to open the scroll?

In the Roman world, sealed legal documents were opened only by those with legitimate authority to authenticate and enact them, so “worthiness” in Revelation 5 is not mainly about moral goodness but rightful qualification. The question is not, “Who is strong enough to break the seals?” but, “Who has the authority to take God’s scroll and bring his purposes for history to completion?”

John weeps because there is no one in all of heaven and earth worthy or qualified to enact the scroll. Until the elders tell him there is one: the Lion of Judah, Jesus.

But what is fascinating, is that when John turns to look at the lion, he sees a lamb that was slain. And that’s really the whole hinge of all of Revelation.

Who is worthy to open the scroll and enact its contents? Revelation’s answer is Jesus—and he is worthy precisely because he has conquered through his sacrificial death: the Lion is worthy because he became the slain Lamb.

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What’s one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- When you picture heaven, what image comes to mind first? Where do you think that picture came from?
- Who or what tends to feel most powerful in the world to you right now—politics, money, violence, technology, culture, something else?

THE TEXT

- Revelation 4-5 (probably too long to read for most groups)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Revelation 4 begins with “a door standing open in heaven.” After the closed-door imagery in Philadelphia and Laodicea, why might this image matter? What does John discover when he is invited to see reality from heaven’s perspective?
2. The dominant image in Revelation 4 is the throne. Everything and everyone seems to be arranged around it. What does the throne communicate about who actually governs reality? How might this vision challenge the way the churches—and we—interpret a world that often looks chaotic or controlled by earthly powers?
3. The living creatures continually worship God, saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.” What do these words emphasize about God’s character and authority? Why might worship be one of Revelation’s primary responses to fear, uncertainty, and competing claims of power?
4. The twenty-four elders repeatedly fall down and cast their crowns before the throne, declaring that God is worthy because he created all things. What might it mean symbolically to lay down a crown? What does this scene suggest about the relationship between whatever authority or status we possess and the ultimate authority of God?

5. In chapter 5, John sees a scroll in God's right hand and hears the question, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" Why is this a question of authority and qualification rather than physical strength? If the scroll represents God's purposes for history, why is it such a serious problem that no one can open it?

6. John begins to weep when no one is found worthy. Why do you think his reaction is so emotional? What would it mean if there were no one capable of confronting evil, setting creation right, and bringing God's purposes to completion?

7. John is told, "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah...has triumphed." But when he turns, he sees "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain." Why do you think John hears "Lion" but sees "Lamb"? How does this moment redefine what victory, power, and conquest look like in the kingdom of God?

8. Heaven sings that Jesus is worthy "because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation." According to Revelation 5, why is Jesus worthy? How might the image of the slain Lamb reshape the way Christians think about power, leadership, victory, suffering, and faithfulness?

APPLICATION

- What power, person, institution, or problem are you most tempted to treat as though it sits on the throne?
- Where are you tempted to define “winning” differently than Revelation does?
- If the Lion conquers as a slain Lamb, what might it look like for you to follow Jesus’ way of power this week—in your relationships, work, conflict, leadership, or suffering?

PRAYER

Spend some time in prayer, simply acknowledging that God is on the throne.

Name the things that currently feel powerful, threatening, or out of control, and place them under the authority of God.

Thank Jesus that he is worthy—not because he conquered through domination, but because he gave himself in sacrificial love.

And ask the Holy Spirit to reshape your imagination so that you learn to recognize the victory of the Lamb and follow his way of faithful, sacrificial love in the world.

WEEK TEN

DEAR WATERSTONE...

OPENING QUESTIONS

- What's one thing from the last week that gave you life—and one thing that drained you?
- Of all the churches we studied—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—which one has stayed with you the most? Why?
- If you could choose one sentence from these letters that you hope Jesus would say about our church, what would it be?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Every letter begins with some version of “I know...” Jesus knows their deeds, suffering, faithfulness, compromise, reputation, love, poverty, and wealth. After studying these letters, what have you learned about what Jesus notices when he looks at a church? What does he seem to care about that churches might be tempted to overlook?
2. Jesus praises very different things across the seven churches: hard work, perseverance, love, faith, service, discernment, endurance, refusing to deny his name, and holding onto his word. Which of those qualities do you genuinely see in our church? Where would you hope Jesus might say to Waterstone, “I know your deeds, and I see this...”?
3. The churches also drift in different ways: Ephesus loses its love, Pergamum compromises, Thyatira makes exceptions, Sardis lives on its reputation, and Laodicea becomes self-sufficient. Which of these dangers do you think is easiest for a healthy, established church to miss? Which should we be especially vigilant about?
4. Several churches looked very different from the outside than they did to Jesus. Smyrna looked poor but Jesus called them rich; Sardis looked alive but Jesus called them dead; Laodicea thought it was rich but Jesus called it poor, blind, and naked. What does this teach us about the difference between the metrics we use to evaluate a church and the things Jesus uses to evaluate one? What might we celebrate that Jesus does not—and what might Jesus celebrate that we fail to notice?

5. Across these letters Jesus repeatedly calls churches to remember, repent, wake up, hold on, and listen. Which of those invitations do you think our church most needs to hear in this season? What might obedience to that invitation actually look like—not just for individuals, but for us together as a church?
6. Each church receives a different picture of Jesus: the one who walks among the lampstands, the one who died and came to life, the one with the sharp sword, the one whose eyes are like fire, the one who holds the seven spirits, the one who opens doors no one can shut, and the faithful and true witness. Which picture of Jesus do you think our church most needs to recover or remember right now? Why?
7. Jesus can be remarkably severe with his churches, but every warning is accompanied by an invitation to repent, endure, return, or overcome. What have these letters taught you about Jesus' love for his church? How is loving a church enough to confront it different from simply criticizing it?
8. Imagine Revelation contained one more letter beginning, "To the church in Littleton write..." Based on everything we have studied, what do you think Jesus might commend in Waterstone? What might he confront? And what might he be inviting us to become?

APPLICATION

- Complete this sentence personally: “After listening to what the Spirit says to the churches, I think I need to hear...”
- Now complete it corporately: “Dear Waterstone, don’t ever lose...”
- What is one thing you can personally do to help Waterstone become more faithful to the kind of church Jesus desires?

PRAYER

Begin by thanking Jesus for the ways he has been faithful to Waterstone and for the places where you see his life at work in the church.

Then spend some time in silence with the repeated invitation from Revelation: “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where Waterstone should be encouraged, where we need to repent, what we need to strengthen, and what we need to hold onto.

Pray that we would never become more concerned with our reputation than our reality, more committed to comfort than faithfulness, or more impressed with what we have than dependent on Jesus.

Ask Jesus to make Waterstone a church that he delights to walk among—a church marked by love, truth, courage, endurance, repentance, and faithful witness.