

Sept/Oct 2019

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

ENCOUNTERING JESUS

ALSO: THE EYES OF YOUR HEART

Friends:

As a multimedia ministry, we at ReFrame Media aim to use communication technologies to become a ministering presence in your life. We write, podcast, email, and otherwise broadcast the gospel in order to help you see God's story already at play in your lives.



But we're not the first to use technology to extend our fellowship.

The whole New Testament, for example, was written by disciples of Christ to reach out across the Roman Empire and encourage Christians wherever they could be found. Many of the books in the New Testament were actually personal letters that brought greetings, teaching, and encouragement from the authors to various groups of Christians (churches).

In the opening chapters of Revelation, for example, John records messages to seven congregations from Jesus himself. And through these writings, we too, along with those churches, encounter Jesus and his words.

This September, Jim Poelman helps us to know Jesus more fully as we explore the opening chapters of Revelation and see Jesus teaching his churches.

Then, in October, Gary Bomhof explores Paul's prayer that we would see Jesus with our inmost being, through the "eyes" of our heart. May we have the ears to hear and the eyes to see what God has to share with us.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive.

—Steven Koster

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“Encountering Jesus”
Jim Poelman



“The Eyes of Your Heart”
Gary Bomhof

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ReFrame
Media

september

Encountering Jesus

Jim Poelman

Our devotions for September are based on the first five chapters of the book of Revelation. Revelation is one of the most neglected and misunderstood books of the Bible. Yet this book is also rich with important teachings and an encouraging message for churches living in uncertain times.

Throughout this month we will often focus on just one or two verses of Revelation each day, and this pace will allow this thought-provoking book to have the time and attention it deserves. As we explore these passages in God's Word together, let's pray that we may encounter the Lord and Savior Jesus anew—or maybe even for the first time.

Pastor Jim Poelman and his wife, Linda, served five churches in Ontario and British Columbia for thirty-nine years. They enjoy family gatherings with their extended household of children and grandchildren—29 members in all—often creating lots of happy noise.

BLESSED ARE . . .

Blessed is the one who reads . . . and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written. . . . —Revelation 1:3

Today, a Sunday, people everywhere will gather in all kinds of settings to worship the Lord as the global community of God's people. Scripture will be read, sermons heard, songs sung, and sacraments celebrated. I hope you will have an opportunity to be part of a gathered worshipping church community today. The church, the worldwide body of Christ, is dear to God's heart, and God promises to bless all who come to him to read and hear his life-giving Word.

The book of Revelation, the concluding book of the Bible, opens with this promise of blessing to the Lord's worshipping communities: "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy. . . ." The blessing begins with the person(s) reading Scripture for the congregation. Perhaps you have been asked to read the Bible today in your church com-

munity, or maybe you will be reading the Bible in the privacy of your home. Be encouraged by Jesus' promise to bless you in the reading of his Word!

Jesus also promises to bless all who hear the Scripture and "take to heart what is written in it." One thing I have learned as a retired pastor is how hard it can be to sit in the pew. I listen with my ears (most of the time), but good listening requires more. Taking the Word to heart happens when the Spirit moves to engage, challenge, and change us. This is not "easy listening," but it is good listening. It is good to be on the receiving end of blessing from God.

Bless us, Lord, in reading and hearing your Word. May we take it to heart and live! Amen.

GREETINGS

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come. . . .
—Revelation 1:4

Revelation is unique in the mix of the Bible's 66 books. It comes as a surprise, a gift, a "revelation" from the same Jesus who came to be the Savior of the world (John 3:16-17). The *timing* of Revelation is important to its story.

Revelation is a gift to the first-century churches at a time when believers were feeling isolated and apart. Perhaps an example can help us appreciate this timing. When my parents immigrated from the Netherlands to Canada, they thought they might never see their family or close friends again. So letters from home became the ties that held loved ones together across a huge distance. When a letter came, everyone stopped what they were doing so they could read and savor what their loved ones far away had written.

Revelation is like a "letter from home" to church communities living in challenging times. At times the early church wondered why Jesus seemed so far away, especially as opposition and persecution increased in the Roman Empire.

Into this uncertainty Jesus sent his family members a message—through an angel, who visited John, one of Jesus' closest followers. This letter sends greetings to everyone with "grace and peace" from him who is and was and is to come.

Today, listen to this greeting from the Lord, our Savior. We are not alone. He surrounds us with grace and peace and the promise of life with him forever.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for your timely and comforting words of encouragement. Amen.

LOVES US . . .

To him 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! Amen.

—Revelation 1:5-6

Sometimes relationships grow stale. We go through the steps of being a friend, a family member, or a spouse, but something goes missing. What gets lost is love. Without love pulsating through them, relationships grow cold. This is why love has an up-front place in the letter of Revelation to all of Jesus' family members, his church.

Revelation begins by recognizing and rejoicing in the truth that God loves us. In fact, this theme runs like a common thread through every book of the Bible.

God's love was well known to his people. So why would this letter state the obvious? Because the people and the churches they were part of, who were the first to receive the letter of Revelation, were facing tough times. Living by

faith in Jesus, they met with public persecution and opposition. And that tempted people to let their faith cool and grow lukewarm.

You may be facing a tough day today too. As we walk through dark valleys in life, we especially need the assurance that God loves us.

Let this good news enter your heart. Be sure to take it with you to the tougher places in your life, and be assured that nothing in all of creation "will be able to separate us from the love God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Thank you, Lord, that in your love for us, you hold on to us faithfully and will never let go. Amen.

THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

"Look, he is coming with the clouds," and "every eye will see him. . . ."
—Revelation 1:7

In the book of Revelation, God wants us to embrace a world bigger than the one that ends at the tip of our nose. We learn to see a bigger world because God speaks and reveals that he is "the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." It is a humbling experience to stand in the presence of the Lord Almighty. Before this God, we learn to know our true selves. God is the Almighty, and by comparison we are small. Regardless of our strengths or weaknesses, we must learn to see ourselves standing before the Lord.

Yet when our eyes are opened to God's being God Almighty, our world becomes a big place. We gain more than a glimpse of the present moment. We learn to live in the expectation of Jesus' coming again to make all things new. Every moment

is filled with longing for the day when God, in Christ, will bring the fullness of his salvation to every part of his creation.

Today we are invited to live in the presence of the Lord God Almighty. His promise to come again fills our day with the prayer "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:9-10).

"Open the eyes of my heart, Lord," that I may live in the joy of your awesome presence. Amen.

PARTNERS

I, John, [am] your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus. . . .

—Revelation 1:9

Revelation is often read as a coded letter written to give a glimpse into the distant future. But John, who adds his voice to that of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in this letter, often speaks in the present. This letter speaks as much about what is currently happening as about what will happen in the future.

From his own experience, John knew the tough times that his fellow believers in Jesus faced. John characterized the Christian faith and life as “the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.” These are present-tense descriptions of following Jesus.

John’s words reveal the heart of a faithful pastor. He did not preach suffering and patient endurance from the safety of a distant pulpit. He spoke as a “brother” and as a “companion” in this suffering. This posi-

tion of “standing with” fellow believers gave credibility to his words.

We need brothers and sisters, friends and companions to encourage us in a life of following Jesus. The testimony of fellow believers in Christ gives us the encouragement we need to live by faith, especially when “patient endurance” is hard to come by.

Whom can you encourage today by sharing with them the concerns you are facing? Who has shown you examples of faithful perseverance through difficulty in their lives?

Lord, thank you for the faithful leaders and friends who encourage me to keep following you. Amen.

STUCK ON PATMOS

I, John . . . was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.
—Revelation 1:9

Patmos was not a pastor's retreat center. It was used by the Roman authorities as a dead-end place of isolation and shame. Offending citizens were exiled to the island of Patmos to learn a lesson: Rome declared that there was no Lord but Caesar. As a leader in the Christian church, however, John had taught people that Jesus Christ is Lord—which he is. So Rome removed John from contact with Christians and churches "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."

This must have created a great hardship for John and for many communities of believers during that time. John would have experienced loneliness and isolation. The churches would have missed his preaching, teaching, and time spent with them.

Rome thought it could disrupt the life and mission of the

church. But Patmos was not so isolated as Rome wanted it to be. God can go anywhere, so it was no problem for the Spirit of God to visit John in this isolated, "godforsaken" place and turn it into a stage revealing the power and majesty of the true Lord and Savior. On Patmos, John received an awe-inspiring vision of Jesus, who revealed to him some of the astonishing greatness of God's kingdom.

May God's Patmos-transforming story give us courage, especially when we feel as if "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" have brought us to a difficult place.

Almighty Lord of all lords
and King of all kings,
"yours is the kingdom and
the power and the glory
forever." Amen.

SILENCE

I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet. . . .

—Revelation 1:10

I imagine that the silence was the most painful part of John's exile on the island of Patmos. John had been used to the noises of busy cities like Ephesus, Sardis, and Philadelphia. These were thriving communities filled with endless sights and sounds. More than anything else, John would have missed hearing the prayers of fellow believers and the praises of the people raised to the Lord in worship on Sundays and in their everyday working life. Patmos was as silent as death.

It was silent until that Sunday, the Lord's Day, when John heard a voice as loud as a trumpet blast. It must have made every hair on his neck stand at attention! John later learned that the voice came from none other than the Lord. Jesus broke into Patmos's silence and commanded John

to write a record of what he was about to see. Then later John would send it to the seven church communities he had worked with.

That Sunday, Jesus also broke heaven's silence. From that day forward God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit revealed God's big salvation story in greater detail. The book of Revelation is not a gift to satisfy our curiosity. It is God's way of helping us come to faith in him, deepen our faith, and give it staying power even in the toughest of times.

Our Father in heaven, thank you for revealing your great salvation of creation story. Lord Jesus, send your Holy Spirit into my heart so that your story becomes my life's story and passion. Amen.

AMONG THE LAMPSTANDS

When I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man. . . .

—Revelation 1:12-13

Here John gives us a glimpse of Jesus after he had risen and ascended to heaven. Words failed John in describing the full scope of what he saw and experienced. What we can understand from these descriptions is that meeting Jesus face to face was not like any other encounter John had ever had. He saw Jesus in the splendor of his divine glory and power. John says that Jesus' face was "like the sun shining in all its brilliance." We get the picture. One does not look at a noon-day sun without being overwhelmed by its power!

What is surprising about John's description is where he saw Jesus standing. When John turned to "see the voice," the first thing he saw was not Jesus. What caught his attention was seven golden lampstands. Later in the story (verse 20), these lampstands are identified as seven churches that

John had worked with as a pastor. It was in the context of familiar church communities that John saw Jesus in the fullness of his glory.

Where do we see Jesus today? We will find him in the mix of his church communities in the many villages, towns, and cities, of our global landscape. Wherever the church gathers today, there Jesus will be found walking among them.

What an awesome gift it is to stand in your presence, Lord Jesus! You are wonderful beyond description. Thank you for being close to your people. In your name we pray. Amen.

TOUCH

Then he placed his right hand on me. . . .

—Revelation 1:17

Throughout his teaching ministry, Jesus gained a reputation for reaching out and touching people. When people with leprosy cried out to be healed, Jesus touched them. He touched the eyes of people who were blind. Touch was an integral component to Jesus' healing ministry.

We see the gift of Jesus' touch in this passage of Revelation too. John fell at Jesus' feet—as though he were dead—because he could not remain standing in the Lord's presence. Jesus responded to John's fear by reaching out, placing his right hand on him, and saying, "Do not be afraid."

What a calming touch Jesus provided! What powerful words of assurance he spoke! This story does more than just provide a picture of what happened to John on the island of Patmos when he stood face

to face with Jesus. This reveals who Jesus is as the ascended and exalted Son of God: Jesus is the Lord of love and compassion. Just as when Jesus came to bring the good news of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-34), touch is central to his healing ministry.

The Spirit of God invites us to see ourselves in this picture. Jesus reaches out to us. He puts his right hand on us, and we hear him say these powerful words: "Do not be afraid."

May we be comforted today by Jesus' touch, his words of assurance, and his presence that removes our fear.

Forgive us, Lord God, for thinking you might be far away from us and out of touch. Lead us more and more into the embrace of your healing touch. Amen.

“I WAS DEAD . . .”

“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.”

—Revelation 1:18

Death is a terrible enemy to God, to us, and to the entire creation. There is little that matches the misery and grief we receive when death comes our way. None of us escapes this enemy—and for our sake, even the Lord Jesus laid down his life (John 10:14-18).

In the way he identified himself to John here, Jesus recalled the events he experienced in Jerusalem at his crucifixion for our sake (John 19-20). “I was dead,” Jesus said, referring to the painful details of his suffering, crucifixion, death, and burial. Jesus knows death firsthand. (See the closing chapters of the Gospel books Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.)

But Jesus wants us to see death as an enemy he has defeated. “I was dead,” Jesus says in the past tense. He *was* dead, but *now* look at him! He says, “I am

the Living One . . . look, I am alive for ever and ever!”

Triumphant over death and grief, Jesus gives us this picture of his forever victory. Death does not have the last word with us. Jesus does! He alone holds the keys to unlock death’s door. The ascended Jesus is the same one who said at the grave of his friend: “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (John 11:25).

Jesus, our good shepherd, thank you for walking with us and leading the way through death’s dark valley. Thank you for being “the resurrection and the life”! Amen.

WRITING LETTERS

“Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”
—Revelation 1:11

Lots of homes have a box of letters from the past stored away in a forgotten corner. The letters may be reminders of a painful chapter in life that was hard to work through. Or perhaps the letters are filled with happy memories. My wife and I have a box of our courtship letters. We have not looked at them since the day they were written, but we can't part with them.

Revelation includes a set of letters written to seven churches. Each letter is unique, identifying the qualities and characteristics of each church community. These are love letters from Jesus to each of these church communities.

I imagine that each of the seven churches read and reread the letter they received from Jesus and were never able to part with it. The letter revealed not

only that Jesus knew them—both their strengths and weaknesses—but also that he loved them.

Thankfully, these seven letters were never thrown away. The Holy Spirit invites us to read them so that we can appreciate what Jesus wrote to the early church communities, and so that we can hear what Jesus is saying to *us*. Jesus' command for John to write was for our benefit too. What a gift it is to receive these letters from Jesus!

Dear Father, may your Holy Spirit lead us so that in reading your letters to your church communities we may hear you speak to us today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

I KNOW YOUR DEEDS

"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance."

—Revelation 2:2

Do you ever feel that the work you do is unseen or at least unacknowledged? How about your service as a believer and as part of the church of Jesus? In reality, Jesus knows exactly what's happening in church communities—he even knows them better than they know themselves.

In this personal letter to the church in Ephesus, Jesus reveals how close he is to this community of believers. He identifies himself as the One who "holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." In a figurative way, Jesus expresses that he holds these communities in the grip of his hand. And he walks around in the midst of these churches.

This is a picture of Jesus intentionally being close to each congregation. Jesus is so close that he knows us in all our ways.

Jesus knew the church in Ephesus, and he begins this letter with rich compliments. He says this church has been a guardian of the truth. False teachers and false teachings found no foothold there. Perseverance in the truth defined this church.

Jesus could say, "I know you, and I know all you are doing for me!" He says this about your church too. Jesus knows everyone in your church community because he holds you all in the grip of his hand and continues to walk where your church serves.

Lord over all, forgive us if we have supposed that you confine yourself to heaven. Thank you for loving each of us and your church communities, holding us all in your embrace. Amen.

REMEMBER YOUR FIRST LOVE

"Yet, I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first."
—Revelation 2:4

Jesus knows each church community and each person in it. He knows our strengths. He knows our weaknesses. The community of believers at Ephesus received praise from Jesus for persevering in the truth. Yet there was a character flaw that needed their immediate attention. They had lost their first love.

This is a powerful revelation. Church communities can be faithful defenders of God's truth, but their love for God can also grow cold. Love is what happens when the amazing grace, mercy, and love of God wash over us, cleansing us, flooding our souls, and making us new. It seems incredible, but God loves us without limit, though we do not deserve any of his love.

Every church community and every member of it needs to linger and live in the wonder

of God's gracious love. We need ways to remember and celebrate this love in the songs we sing, the prayers we raise, the stories we share, the sacraments we celebrate, and the care we give to others.

Jesus uses a word in this letter that brings us back to the way he started his public ministry: "repent." This is a call to turn around, change direction, and get back on course. For church communities to be Spirit-filled, "golden lampstands," the passion of love needs to be pulsing through our veins.

"You have searched me, LORD, and you know me." Bring me back to remembering your amazing love for me, O God, and help me to be faithful. Amen.

THE CROWN OF LIFE

“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”
—Revelation 2:10

Jesus knows his church communities completely. He knows our strengths and weaknesses. He also knows our sufferings.

In his letter to the church in Smyrna, Jesus reveals that he knew the afflictions of his followers there. He also knew that their suffering of injustices would grow worse. He composed this short letter to give hope and encouragement to their church community.

Suffering even more for their faith in Jesus would not be easy. Jesus described the enemies of the church as followers of Satan, the great deceiver who wants to destroy God’s people and all of God’s creation. Some of the Christians in Smyrna would be put in prison, Jesus said, and they would suffer persecution. John himself was being punished for his faith by being exiled

to Patmos. Some others, like Polycarp of Smyrna, who was taught by John, were later executed for speaking out, teaching that Jesus is the Lord and Savior of the world. Like those early Christians, we too are called to “be faithful, even to the point of death.”

Suffering tests the character and strength of our faith in Jesus. We may also suffer terrible illness, grief, or financial loss—and find that it challenges our faith. But Jesus says, “Do not be afraid,” because, even though our enemy, the devil, may seem to have the upper hand, God will give us life forever with him.

Strengthen us, Lord, that we may be faithful to you always. Amen.

WHERE SATAN LIVES

"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."
—Revelation 2:13

Jesus describes Pergamum as a city where "Satan lives" and where "Satan has his throne." In this city one of the faithful Christians, Antipas, was put to death for his faith in Jesus. Faced with persecution and threats, the church in this city remained faithful to Jesus.

In his letter to this community of believers, Jesus commended and praised the church for their loyalty. Indeed, remaining faithful at the risk of losing one's life is to live by faith at a high price.

Church communities continue to live in dangerous places. There are many communities in the world where believers live by faith in Jesus in the midst of threats to life, property, and well-being. Many have also been forced to leave their homelands, where for centuries the church shone the light of Christ into dark places.

Others have been killed or imprisoned.

Their continued loyalty as witnesses to Jesus provides strong encouragement to the church in all places. At great cost and even loss of life, they urge us to make the most of every opportunity to be faithful witnesses of Jesus.

Today let's remember those who, like Antipas, remained faithful, even at the cost of their lives. And let us pray for the safety of all believers who serve where Satan has power over many of the local leaders and citizens.

Thank you, Lord, for being close to your people in places where Satan has strongholds. Thank you for their loyalty to you and their witness to us. Amen.

SEXUAL IMMORALITY

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam. . . .”

—Revelation 2:14

Threats to our faith in Jesus seldom come through the main doors. Most threats are deceptive and subtle. Martyrdom and persecution were main-door threats to the church in Pergamum. Sexual immorality and delicious food that had been sacrificed to other gods were side-door threats. These were common practices that most of the people of Pergamum were used to.

It appears, though, that only some of the people in the congregation at Pergamum were promoting immoral sex and food sacrificed to idols. It was, however, enough to warrant a warning from Jesus in this personal letter.

This letter provides no further details on the matter of food for idols and sexual immorality. But there *is* a clear call for everyone to stop and repent—

and to do so immediately—or else they would later have to face further correction from Jesus.

Are there any immoral cultural practices that have a side-door route into our church communities? Are there moral blind spots that you or your church might be practicing or even promoting? Jesus speaks firmly against these threatening practices. He says, “Stop! Repent. Be faithful!”

Dear God, open our eyes to any subtle threats trying to creep into our communities. May your firm and final call to repent fill us with conviction and hope and encourage us to change. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

MORE THAN BEFORE

"I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."

—Revelation 2:19

Jesus' letter to the church in Thyatira is the longest of his letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. It begins with a reminder that Jesus has eyes "like blazing fire," which means he can see clearly into all things. And his feet are described as "like burnished bronze," meaning he is powerfully firm and able to stand against any threats to his churches, whom he corrects and protects.

Jesus praises this church for the character and quality of their faith. From the time that they first started to follow Jesus, their faith has grown. Jesus can see that their faithfulness and obedience have increased.

How has faith thrived in this community? Jesus identifies several characteristics that define this church. They have practiced love and faith. They have served God in the city

where they have lived. And they have done this consistently, with perseverance.

Churches and followers of Jesus in every community can learn to live by faith more and more by following this example of the church in Thyatira. We can all find new ways to grow in our walk with God. Likewise, we are called to carry on in the good work we are doing.

Let love and faith show themselves in the way you live. Practice being a servant, as Jesus did, and do it consistently.

Thank you, Father, for examples of service and love that are practiced more and more faithfully. By your Spirit's power, help us to grow in love, faith, service, and perseverance. Amen.

REPENTANCE

"I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling."
—Revelation 2:21

In this part of his letter to the church in Thyatira, Jesus calls for repentance. Though he does that in other letters too, in this letter repentance has center stage.

The situation has to do with a woman called Jezebel and her resistance to God's call for repentance. Here we see that refusing to repent is like building a stone wall against God's grace. God's season of grace is filled with Jesus' calls to God's children to turn from their ways of disobedience and toward a life that is "in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). We need to make good use of the time that God gives us for repentance.

When Jesus speaks about Jezebel's "children," we see how easy it can be to get caught up in a movement. It may be easy for us to ignore the call to repentance when

we think, "Everyone is doing it!" Repentance demands that we listen more to Jesus than we do to our peers.

In Jesus' address to the rest of the church, we see how repenting and turning away from false teaching helps the community to flourish and grow in authority to live God's way. We need a caring, supporting, and loving church community, and we need to "hold on to what [we] have" until Jesus returns. Repentance works best when we work at it with fellow followers of Jesus.

Almighty God and loving good shepherd, thank you for your persistent and powerful calls to repent. Break down the walls we build. Let your kingdom come. Amen.

DEAD OR ALIVE?

"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!"
—Revelation 3:1-2

In his letter to the church in Sardis, Jesus aims to awaken sleepy believers. Does any of this apply to our churches today? This would not be a flattering letter to any church community, especially for one that had "a reputation of being alive."

Churches often allow themselves to be lulled into believing that all is well when the Word of God is preached with power and skill, the sacraments are celebrated, church programs are filled with participants, and budgets are met. By all appearances, these activities speak of a church's health and vitality.

But Jesus makes a bold statement to churches in this mindset: "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead!" This is a shocking revelation! Instead of just having a *reputation* for being alive, the church community must put into prac-

tice what they have received and heard (Revelation 1:3).

Obedience—receiving God's Word, celebrating the sacraments, and letting these gifts of God shape how we live—is what Jesus looks for. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice," Jesus said at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, "is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (Matthew 7:24).

So let's do more than merely look alive. Let's make sure we listen and obey.

Your Word is more precious than gold, Lord. Speak into our hearts, and help us to obey, to put into practice what you have given us. In your name we pray. Amen.

A FEW PEOPLE

"Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. . . ."
—Revelation 3:4

As he continues in his letter to the church in Sardis, Jesus speaks with love and care for the few faithful believers who remain. Sardis has a "reputation of being alive," but for some reason only a few members are actually faithful.

Are you part of a church that has felt the effects of change? Maybe your church once was big and bustling with many ministries, but now you are part of a small remnant. Has the main body of believers drifted away or lost its drive? There are many reasons for declining numbers and changes in membership. For the few people who still love to worship and serve the Savior in that church, changes like these can hurt deeply.

Many churches in our global community are made up of "a few people." If you are part of a declining church or you are just small in number, be en-

couraged by Jesus' words. Ask him for guidance and to help you remain faithful.

Jesus praises the few who remain faithful despite apathy in the community around them, or trends that may draw some members away. Though "the few" might not be seen as a "success" in terms of numbers, Jesus will acknowledge them. He knows who his people are.

This is a powerful encouragement to followers of Christ who may feel small and insignificant. Be faithful and know that the Lord stands with you.

Lord, thank you for your love and care for the few people in many places who love to gather and serve in your name. Forgive us when we lose sight of your amazing love for us. Amen.

LITTLE STRENGTH

"I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."
—Revelation 3:8

Jesus' letter to the church in Philadelphia is filled with praises and promises. This is a letter of love and encouragement. Encouragement from Jesus is what this church needed for the long road of faithful obedience.

In the course of my pastoral ministry, I have met faithful followers of Jesus who experienced many disappointments and difficulties. I would often attempt to encourage them with Bible passages like Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd. . . ." But some would respond, saying, "Pastor, the words of Psalm 22—'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'—speak more honestly of my life experience."

I often wondered what Jesus would say to these hurting friends. The letter to the church in Philadelphia is Jesus' word to his hurting people. "I know that you have little strength,"

he says, "yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name." Jesus knows how tired we can get from walking the long road of obedience, "even . . . through the darkest valley," as Psalm 23 explains.

Like a long-distance runner who needs encouragement for the last part of a race, we need Jesus to cheer us on to keep his word and not deny his name.

May God give you the grace to endure patiently today and to trust that Jesus will do all he promises for the ones he loves dearly.

Dear Lord, sometimes I'm tired and have little strength to hold on to you. You are Almighty God. Help me to endure with patient persistence. Amen.

THE DECEITFULNESS OF SUCCESS

"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent."
—Revelation 3:19

Jesus' letter to his church in Laodicea is stirring and gripping in its imagery. This church community is identified as being like lukewarm water, not fit for drinking. The plot thickens when Jesus says, "I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

What created this culture of being neither cold nor hot?

There was a smug sense of self-security based on accumulated wealth and possessions. This church had become rich in material goods. Prosperity and success convinced the Laodicean Christians that they had everything they needed.

In this letter Jesus gives smug self-security a bone-chilling reality check. He says, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." I wonder which hurt more: being told that they did not know the truth of their

own condition, or the string of negative descriptions that we read here.

These are painful words for a church to hear. But at the same time, these words reveal the degree to which Jesus loves even a lukewarm community of believers.

Today let us listen to Jesus' reality check for what it is: a love letter calling for repentance and change.

Thank you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for loving us to the point of being honest and real. Shepherd us away from our smug senses of self-security and independence. Amen.

HERE I AM! KNOCKING

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock."

—Revelation 3:20

An unexpected knock at your door from a dear friend or family member is a welcome surprise. Few occasions are as precious as seeing a long-absent loved one who comes to visit. "Here I am!" they say as you open your door, and their presence fills you with joy.

Jesus stands at our door, knocking. We may think sometimes that he is far removed from us and our church bodies. But he is, by his own revelation, as close as the door to our homes and our church communities. He wants us to hear his knocking—he is that close.

And Jesus longs for us to do more! He wants us to respond and open all our closed doors.

Maybe you are afraid to open the door of your life to Jesus. After all, how does one welcome the Son of God, the Almighty, into their whole life?

Or maybe just having Jesus inside your church building is as close as you want him to be.

But Jesus keeps knocking, eager for us to open our lives to him. He wants to be as close as a beloved friend in our lives.

Do not worry about how to welcome Jesus in. Just open the door. He promises to take care of the rest. He will come in and celebrate with whoever opens the door, bringing joy and abundance so that your life will be filled—with even more than the greatest feasting, fun, and goodness of life you could imagine.

Lord Jesus, what a gift of love and honor you bring by knocking at our door. Please come in and transform us by your presence. Amen!

HEAVEN'S OPEN DOOR

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.
—Revelation 4:1

In chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, the focus shifts to a new and powerful story of God's ongoing mission. This new section begins with John seeing "a door standing open in heaven."

This picture surprises us because we know that an open door often extends an invitation to come in. This is an enticing opportunity because heaven is often considered a place of mysteries that we do not have access to. For the most part, it is God's secret—at least from our day-to-day living in this life. But here Jesus opens heaven's door. And in a voice like a trumpet, he welcomes us, saying, "Come up here."

The invitation promises to reveal "what must take place after this." But as John tells the story of walking through heaven's open door, the future is not the first thing that catches his attention. Instead, he

sees "a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it."

Heaven's open door has us standing before the throne of all thrones, from which everything in heaven and on earth is loved and cared for.

Still today, the Holy Spirit opens heaven's door wide so that we can visualize this scene and let its story encourage us to live by faith in Jesus today.

Lord Jesus, what a marvelous gift you have revealed in heaven's open door and in your invitation to "come up here." Give us hope as we reflect on your ongoing rule and reign today. In your name, Amen.

THE ONE WHO SAT THERE

The one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby.

—Revelation 4:3

In John's vision of heaven we soon see that the focal point is the one who sits on the throne. Here Revelation brings us into the awesome presence of the Lord God Almighty.

This is not the first time the Bible tells of someone standing before the Lord Almighty (see Isaiah 6:1-8; Ezekiel 1; Daniel 10). But since the time of Jesus' ascension to heaven (Acts 1:9-11), this is the first sustained and detailed description of "the one who sat on the throne." Even so, we are not given a full description of the Lord.

This revelation is not for satisfying our curiosity. The Lord God opens heaven's door and has us stand in his presence so that faith in him may spring to life, grow in conviction, and be sustained in hope.

In our world of mixed emotions and situations—joy and sorrow, doubt and conviction, success and failure, health and sickness—God wants us to see that our world is centered in him.

The gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus' ministry began with the words "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:15). And here in Revelation we see that Jesus' mission continues as he is seated on the throne.

Hallelujah! Our God reigns!

Lord, what a powerful and gracious gift you give us! We stand in awe and amazement that you reign over all things. Help us to have deeper faith, trust, and hope in you. In your name, our Lord and Savior, we pray. Amen.

SURROUNDING THE THRONE

Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones. . . . In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures. . . .

—Revelation 4:4, 6

We meet interesting and intriguing characters close to the Lord God and encircling his throne. We might wonder, “Do these elders and creatures help us understand what living in heaven will be like?” It turns out they do more than that; they also show us how to live in God’s kingdom today.

The twenty-four elders, seated on thrones around God’s throne, have long been understood to represent God’s people. Twelve of them represent the people of God in the Old Testament: the twelve tribes of Israel. The other twelve elders represent the church formed under the shepherding care of Jesus’ twelve apostles. The presence of the elders shows that God has given his people a special place in his kingdom; we will rule and reign with God.

Along with the twenty-four elders, we also meet “four living creatures.” They too encircle God and his throne. The living creatures represent “everything that has breath” (Psalm 150:6; see Genesis 2:7) in God’s whole creation. Wild animals, domesticated animals, human beings, and all other creatures have a place of honor and service in God’s throne room.

God’s redemptive care covers his entire creation. As the people who will one day rule and reign with God, God calls us to exercise dominion by loving and caring for all he has made.

Thank you, Lord, for loving and redeeming your whole creation. You love everything you have made. Help us to mirror your care for your entire creation. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

COME, LET US WORSHIP

Whenever the living creatures give glory . . . the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. —Revelation 4:9-10

Heaven's throne room is filled with sounds of praise and worship. The four living creatures give round-the-clock adoration to the One on the throne. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty," they proclaim. This is a picture of all creation honoring God as the Creator and Lord over all things—the only one worthy of all praise.

Creation's song of praise—led by the four living creatures—serves as a call to worship for the twenty-four elders. God's people cannot help responding in worship when surrounded by the authentic, enthusiastic praises of all the rest of creation.

All God's people in his worldwide church—young and elderly, seekers and established followers—help each other celebrate and confess with praise. Together, we join with the rest of creation, saying, "You are

worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they . . . have their being."

This picture reminds us that just as creation constantly proclaims the glory of God (Psalm 19), so can all God's people—in our work and play each day as well as when we gather for a worship service. All things give glory to God for bringing them into being, and he keeps all creation in his constant care. Our creating, life-sustaining God is worthy to receive our praise always.

Lord and Creator of all things, open our eyes and ears to the glory and praise of your whole creation. Teach us to respond with praise also in all we think, say, and do. Amen.

A SCROLL WITH SEVEN SEALS

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

—Revelation 5:1

God's throne room is full of surprises. Having seen all the people and creatures surrounding God's throne and giving constant praise, John is now drawn to focus on a scroll.

The scroll is in God's right hand, which means it is important to God and all of creation. This scroll is also unusual in that it has writing on both sides. The words of God's law on stone tablets were written that way too (Exodus 32:15).

Also surprising is the number of seals used to keep the scroll closed. One seal would have been enough to keep it closed from view. But this scroll has *seven* seals!

Most surprising is that it will require someone special—someone “worthy”—to “break the seals and open the scroll.” But the text says that no one in heaven, on earth, or anywhere

in creation is worthy to open the scroll—or even to peek inside it.

God has a powerful, one-of-a-kind story to reveal. It will take someone unique, worthy, and special to open this book and tell its story.

The only One to be able to break the seals and reveal the story's contents also sits on the throne of all thrones.

Your Word is full of amazing surprises, Lord. There is always more to your story than we might suppose. Thank you! Prepare our minds and hearts for what you have in store for us next. In Jesus, Amen.

I WEPT AND WEPT

I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.
—Revelation 5:4

Today the sounds of praise, prayer, and worship will be heard in churches around the world. Here on earth, we are invited to gather like the elders around God's throne, singing, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. . . ."

We are also invited to hear the apostle John weeping in the throne room of heaven. John, an apostle and faithful follower of Jesus, saw no shame in letting it be known that he "wept and wept." He let his tears flow like a river when he learned that no one in all creation was worthy to break the scroll's seals and open God's story.

We are reminded that worship includes weeping and lament. Each of us needs to recognize that none of us worthy to open the story of our salvation. We need the one and only Savior—God's Son, Jesus.

He is worthy to break the seals and to open up the story because he is the Lamb of God who takes away our sin and its damaging effects on the whole creation.

When Jesus, the Lion and the Lamb of God, steps into our lives, our tears of weeping turn to tears of joy and thanksgiving. Though we weep in the midst of our misery in sin, we are also called to rejoice in all that Jesus has done for us!

Thank you, Lord, for this prolonged and important moment of coming to grips with the depths of our brokenness. Let us weep in longing for your coming, and let us worship in boundless praise for being saved to new life in Jesus! Amen.

FROM EVERY TRIBE AND NATION

“With your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.” —Revelation 5:9

Today our glimpse into heaven’s throne room closes with a finale of praise. The praises from the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures swell to include “thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand” angels. Their praises then join with those of “every creature” in heaven and throughout the creation.

We are invited to join all of heaven and earth in giving praise and honor to “him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.” All three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—work in us to make this possible. We know that God the Father created us to give worship to him.

Jesus redeemed us by his blood to be a unique body together in the giving of our worship. By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus has purchased us “from every tribe and language and people

and nation.” He has made us “to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God.” Jesus builds bridges and creates bonds between people who have learned to raise dividing walls.

Today the Holy Spirit moves churches to become places where the gifts of unity, hospitality, and love, purchased by Jesus’ blood, are felt, experienced, and practiced. Within and through the witness of church communities, walls come tumbling down, and bonds of unity between peoples of all nations and languages are made anew.

Lord Jesus, equip us and your churches everywhere to be places that show—in word and deed—the unity you bring to all peoples through your death and resurrection. Amen.



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