

Subject Line: Revelation Week One

Mon: Rev. 1:1-20

Tues: Rev. 2:1-11

Wed: Rev. 2:12-29

Thur: Rev. 3:1-22

Fri: Rev. 4:1-11

Happy Sunday!

Imagine for a moment you're a citizen of ancient Rome, surrounded by temples to Greco-Roman gods and looming symbols of the empire's insurmountable military, economic, and political power. There is no force more imposing or all-encompassing than the might of Rome.

To visit key places, like the market or hospital, you must first make an offering to a certain god or goddess, or even the emperor himself; If you refuse, you're met with suspicion or open hostility. In fact, some of your friends or family members may have met brutal ends because of their unwillingness to worship Caesar or the empire. There was no separation of church and state—politics and religion were intricately woven alongside economic and social life—as a Christian, it was extremely difficult to remain faithful to the One True God *and* participate in the Roman way of life.

What would you do if you were in their shoes?

Revelation is one of the most misunderstood and misinterpreted books in the Bible. It's met with apprehension and, at times, disgust over its violent war-like imagery. But at its heart, Revelation is simply a work designed to encourage and challenge a group of people living in the tension of that question above. What does it look like to remain faithful, to persevere, when every aspect of your life is luring you to worship the empire and its false gods?

Many people are tempted to read Revelation today while holding the newspaper up and looking for signs of a looming apocalypse or disaster. But what if instead, we read Revelation in light of its original context? I wonder if we would sense the same question nagging at the back of our minds... what does it mean to be faithful to God in the midst of our modern Empires—both the tangible kingdoms of the world and the ones we've created for ourselves?

Starting this week, we're going to explore this book first through the lens of its original cultural and historical context and second through the lens of the Hebrew Bible. There are *hundreds* of links from Revelation back to the Old Testament, so much so that scholars estimate *every single verse* in Revelation contains at least one (and sometimes seven!) references to the Hebrew Bible.

For that reason, we must read Revelation remembering that it was not written *to us*, even though it was written *for us*.

This is one of the tips we recommend centering yourself around as you prepare to dig into this book. If you want to get a full overview, check out week one of my class, *This Week in Revelation*. [Here's a link to watch](#). Want the short version? [Check out this visual guide to reading Revelation](#) we put together.

One last note before we dive in: Revelation is incredibly complex, dense, and rich. If Elizabeth and I were to share every detail, Old Testament reference, or historical note this email be even more *unbearably* long. So, we're going to do our best to limit ourselves to what we think is essential to understanding the message of the book and what it means for us today. As always, we'll provide plenty of resources along the way so you can continue to dig on your own if you want more information.

I truly believe this is one of the most meaningful and important books in the Bible! So, let's dive in and explore the beauty Revelation has to offer.

Happy reading!

About the Reading

Monday

Prologue & Greeting to Seven Churches

In the very first verses of Revelation, we find out some key details about what we're reading. Revelation is made up of three types of literature:

- Apocalyptic
- Prophetic
- Circular letter

While we're tempted to hear "apocalyptic" and think of the *end of the world*, that's not what it means at all. [Apocalyptic literature](#) is a common Jewish style of writing that is full of symbolic imagery that takes place within a dream or vision and is meant to encourage God's people to persevere in the face of some kind of challenge or difficulty. The word *apocalypse* is the Greek word, *apokalypsi* which means "unveiling." It's the same word Paul used to describe his [conversion experience in Acts](#). The idea is of some kind of profound experience that allows you to see the world through a new perspective, revealing truth in such an intense way that your life is forever changed.

In the prologue, John tells us that this work is a *revelation* or *apokalypsi* of Jesus Christ. Which means he hopes his readers are about to experience that same kind of life-transforming unveiling so they can see the world and the cosmos properly.

John also says that this revelation was given by God to “show his servants the things that must soon take place.” This is where prophecy comes in. We often think of prophecy as talking exclusively about future events. But that’s not quite right. While prophecy does at times speak to future events, its primary focus is to offer challenge or encouragement to God’s people as they encounter different struggles or face persecution. It’s believed that Revelation was written during the rule of Roman Emperor Domitian between 94 and 96 AD. This was a time when Christians were facing persecution for their belief in God and their unwillingness to worship Caesar as Lord. It was also a time when some Christians were thriving because they were participating in empire life and benefiting financially as a result. This book was designed as a challenge to those compromising Christians who succumbed to empire worship and encouragement for those on the opposite end facing Roman persecution.

Finally, in verse four, we learn that Revelation is also a circular letter written to seven churches throughout Asia Minor. Why seven churches? Seven is going to show up a whole lot in Revelation; it’s the number of completion or perfection. These seven churches are real communities in Asia Minor, but they are also representative of *all* churches throughout the Christian world. In other words, Revelation was not written *to us*, though it is written *for us*, and for every Christian community through the generations.



Seven times Revelation will offer a blessing like in v. 3. “Blessed is the one who...” The point is that reading Revelation is an act that calls us back to faithful worship of God.

Did you catch the reference to the Trinity in the opening prologue as well today? Look at verses four and five: “Grace to you and peace from **him who is and who was and who is to come [God]**, and from the **seven spirits** who are before his throne, and from **Jesus Christ** the faithful witness...”

Seven spirits is again a nod to the number of completion; In fact, the seven spirits will be referred to a total of seven times in Revelation (with another seven references just to the Spirit). It’s a way of talking about the fullness of God’s power in the world.

Toward the end of John's initial greeting, he picks up language from two Old Testament prophets to talk about Jesus. In [Daniel 7](#), which is also apocalyptic literature, Daniel receives a vision about a "son of man," who we know through multiple New Testament writers to be Jesus.

"And behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed."

John also draws upon [Zechariah 12](#), a passage that talks about the Davidic covenant and how God is going to restore Israel through the Messiah—*the one they pierced*.

Then we get a Divine proclamation from God in Rev. 1:8: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Here's the cool thing. John is going to use the power of seven *again* to make a profound statement about the relationship between God and Jesus. The Divine Title is going to appear *seven* times at the beginning and end of the book, at times referring to God and other times to Jesus.

- Rev. 1:8: God says, "I am the Alpha and Omega."
- Rev. 1:17: Jesus says, "I am the first and the last"
- Rev. 21:6: God says, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end."
- Rev. 22:13: Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

Each of the statements—Alpha and Omega, first and last, beginning and end—mean the same thing. Alpha is the first Greek letter, and Omega the last. First and last. Beginning and end. If they all mean the same thing, then the title occurs seven times total between God and Jesus. What's the point? **The author is equating Jesus to God as representing the fullness of the divine being.** This would've been a powerful statement countering any who believed Jesus was merely a good teacher or prophet, exceptional, sure, but just another human. John says absolutely not. **Jesus is a member of the God-head, he is as divine as God is divine.**

Vision of the Son of Man

Finally, John is going to tell us a little about himself. While it's hotly debated exactly who *John* is,

what we do know is that, at some point, John was exiled on the island of Patmos (see photo above). We're not explicitly told why, but it clearly has something to do with his belief in Jesus. In other words, John identifies with the people who are suffering on account of Jesus. He is in the same boat.

John introduces us to a literary pattern that is essential to understanding some key moments in Revelation. John says in verse 10 that he "heard" something—a voice like a trumpet commanding him to write Revelation. Then, he's going to turn around and "see" something else—seven golden lampstands. John *hears* one thing and then *sees* something slightly different.

Remember this pattern of hearing and seeing—what John will see is likely going to subvert your expectations based on what he *hears*.

In this case, what John *hears* are instructions for the seven churches, represented by the lampstands (think menorah). What he *sees* are the seven lampstands, but in their midst is one like a Son of Man (remember [Daniel 7!](#)). He sees Jesus, described in the language of the prophets Daniel, [Ezekiel](#), and [Isaiah](#).

From his mouth comes a double-edged sword. In the Roman world, this was a symbol of authority, a status reserved for some cities referred to as *potestas gladii*. Cities granted "the power of the sword" were able to make decisions on the Emperor's behalf, as if they were the Emperor themselves. That Jesus holds this symbol means he speaks and acts with the authority of God.

He holds seven stars in his hand. When ancient Romans looked at the stars in the sky, they noticed there were seven that were stationary (sun, moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn). They developed an ideology based on their gods that said to hold these seven stars in your hand meant you controlled the cosmos. John is drawing on this idea to say it is no Roman or Greek god (or emperor) who controls the universe, but Jesus Christ.

John also notes that Jesus' face is shining like the sun. This is a [callback to Moses](#), whose face shined like the sun as he descended Mt. Sinai with the commandments after speaking with God. This was only temporary, but Moses had to wear a veil to cover his face. We see this same thing happen with Jesus at the Transfiguration in [Matthew 17](#) when the veil is pulled back. While Moses' condition was temporary, Jesus shines in full strength.

The most important takeaway from all of these images is that Jesus, who shines with the full radiance of God, who has authority and power from Heaven, stands *with the seven churches*—meaning all churches throughout the world and throughout history. **Jesus is in their midst and therefore is in *our midst*. What then do we have to fear if Jesus is with us?**

By the end of this chapter, John has been instructed to write this *apocalypse*, this "unveiling" about Jesus Christ, by both God and Jesus. There can be no doubt, Revelation is a message from the God who created the universe and the Son of Man who stands amid the churches. It is

a message of encouragement, comfort, and challenge to all those who read it and are tempted to succumb to the various empires that compete for control over our lives and the world at large.

– AJ

Tuesday | Revelation 2:1-11

Overview of the Seven Letters:

Why did John pick *these* seven churches? Seven is the number of completion, so John is symbolically talking to *all* churches in all places across all generations. But why does he specifically call out these seven geographically? These seven cities happened to be centers for the Imperial Cult—an official title that came with all kinds of benefits (like paying lower taxes). John specifically calls out these churches because his driving motivation is to challenge Christians who might be tempted to worship anything other than God.

Fun fact, the order of these seven letters is built around the Roman postal system of the day; This is the natural path through Asia Minor a letter carrier would take through these seven cities. Each of the seven letters features the same basic structure:

- Opening Greeting – unique to the cultural context and theme of the particular city.
- Positive Encouragement – “I know...” Jesus sees the truth of their current condition.
- Challenge – “But I have this against you...” Jesus is going to issue some words of caution and warning that are unique to each community.
- Final refrains: “Let him hear what the Spirit says...” This is likely a nod to Jesus’ common saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” It’s a way of signifying these letters as prophetic messages from Jesus, through the Spirit, to the churches. “To the one who conquers...” What are they conquering? We won’t find out until chapter 12, but whatever it is will require their active participation; they have a role to play in the unfolding drama.

Before we explore the individual letters, you should know the BEMA Podcast is a fantastic resource for these! A vast majority of what we’re going to talk about concerning cultural context comes directly from them. You can find a link to each episode, one for each church, at the bottom of this email. They are short, sweet, and highly informative.

Letter to Ephesus

The closest church on the Roman mail delivery route happened to be Ephesus, a port city. Ephesus was the second-largest city in the Roman Empire and the capital city of Domitian’s rule. Ephesus, if you remember from Acts, is a hot spot for the worship of Artemis.

According to N.T. Wright, the temple to Artemis featured a huge tree as its focal point. “Criminals who came within a certain distance of it would be free from capture and punishment.” This will make sense later.

Of all the churches, Ephesus receives the most praise. They are doing pretty good at staying away from evil-doers and recognizing false teachers. But there’s one problem: “You have abandoned the love you had at first.”

We’re not told explicitly what this means for Ephesus, but you have to think they would know

exactly what it meant. Marty Solomon from BEMA has a pretty plausible theory. They are clearly doing well with right belief (orthodoxy), but they are struggling with how to live out what they believe (orthopraxy). Remember what the driving issue was in Acts? Ethnically Jewish and Gentile believers were learning to practice their faith together.

What if the issue at hand in Ephesus is that the Jewish believers have forgotten their first love by forgetting to practice love for their Gentile brothers and sisters the way Paul taught them?

Jesus' message to Ephesus continues with another praise about how they hate the Nicolaitans (a group we don't really know much about but will encounter again in the letter to Pergamum).

Finally, we get the ending refrain, "To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

John draws on the image of the asylum tree in the temple of Artemis to call attention to Jesus' [tree of life](#)—a nod both back to Genesis and forward to the end of this book—the tree that grants life to all who are in its presence.

As for conquering, N.T. Wright explains, "They are to 'conquer', not by fighting back, but by following Jesus himself, who won the victory through his own patient suffering. Some in these churches will suffer. Some will die. All must bear patient witness to Jesus, thereby 'conquering' the evil forces that surround and threaten them."

Letter to Smyrna

Smyrna was a city known for its devotion to science and medicine; it was one of the cultural centers of the Roman world. The city was very loyal to Rome and worshipped the goddess "Roma" as part of the Imperial Cult. Smyrna was so loyal to Empire, that Christians here faced a particularly difficult time participating in regular life. It was difficult to buy, sell, or even visit the doctor without somehow worshiping other gods or the Emperor in the process. Add to that the fact that Smyrna was home to a Jewish community that was hostile to Gentiles.

Smyrna was obsessed with death and resurrection. One of their main exports was myrrh—that's where they got their name, *S–myr–na*. Myrrh was a spice used to prepare bodies for burial. It's also well documented that Smyrna had gone through a sort of death and rebirth of its own—it was destroyed in 600 BC and subsequently rebuilt). With that in mind, it's no surprise how the letter opens, "The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life."

Smyrna was wealthy because of its exports; this was a consumer-driven society. As a result, Smyrna created a cast system using the image of different colored crowns to designate social statuses.

Jesus tells them he knows about their tribulation and their poverty—how they've been having a hard time thriving in a community that is set against them and actively persecuting them. He tells them not to fear because they are the ones who are ultimately rich in the things that matter. Jesus calls to attention the "synagogue of Satan," a reference not to all Jews, but to the ones who are rejecting Gentiles. One of the primary drivers of the Jewish faith was being a light to the Gentiles, bringing them blessing through their own blessing (remember [Genesis 12?](#)). Because they are not doing that, they are working against God (they're not actually Jewish in the ways that count).

The letter ends with a warning that more trouble is coming. For those who remain faithful and persevere, they will be given the “crown of life”—a fitting reward for a city obsessed with crowns and status.

– AJ

Wednesday | Revelation 2:12-29

Today we are finishing off chapter 2 with the letters to Pergamum and Thyatira, and both of these cities were called out for the same problem: they are losing their ability to say ‘no’ to the surrounding culture.

Letter to Pergamum

Pergamum was a hotbed of emperor worship and the core of the imperial cult. Here the opposition against Christians who refused to participate in the Roman religion was particularly intense. It seems to me that this is what John means when writes that their city is “where Satan’s throne is” (v. 13). It was an incredibly pagan city! N.T. Wright puts it this way, “John does not identify Rome with the devil. But, as we shall see, he believes that the devil has been using Rome for his own ends, not least to attack the church. And Pergamum was the seat of the Roman governor of the whole region.”

When Jesus addresses this church, surrounded by fervent pagan worship, he reminds them that He is the one who holds the “sharp two-edged sword” (v. 12). Pergamum was one of those cities that had the power of the sword.

So, when Jesus claims the double-edged sword, he is saying, “Remember, I am the one with the power.” It is not Pergamum but Jesus who actually carries out just judgments. It is Jesus who holds the authority. It is Jesus who rules over all, including the Romans.

Then, He names what this church is struggling with in two ways: a first-century heresy and a reference to Balaam, an Old Testament character you might remember from Numbers.

First, let’s address the heresy. Remember the false teachers, called the Nicolaitans, Alex mentioned yesterday? While Ephesus was able to reject their teaching, the people in Pergamum did not. Essentially, the Nicolaitans taught that Christians could follow Jesus and still have full engagement with the Roman empire; they proposed that Christians could participate in pagan practices like sacrifices to the gods and all of the sordid rituals that went with them while remaining spiritually pure and devoted to God. Some of the Christians in Pergamum bought into this dangerous lie, trying to have one foot in the world and one foot in the Church.

Next, Balaam. When Jesus tells the church that they are holding to the teaching of Balaam, every Jew hearing these words would hear within that sentence an entire sermon. I would not fault you if you are not as familiar with this (admittedly very obscure) Old Testament figure, so let me recap this for you. Balaam was a Gentile prophet that we meet in [Numbers 22](#). He was summoned by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites, but he managed to make Israel stumble through a different tactic. He advises King Balak to send Moabite women into the Israelite camps to seduce them into sexual immorality and idolatry (yikes!)

The bottom line here is that Jesus is drawing a parallel between Balaam and the false teachers, who led these Christians astray. Just as Balaam showed the Moabites how to lead Israel into

sin, so too did these false teachers throw a stumbling block in the path of these Christians in Pergamum. Jesus is saying, “You have been here before, don’t fall into this temptation again! And for those of you who have, repent!”

Letter to Thyatira

Thyatira was a small, blue-collar city full of hardworking tradesmen who joined together in trade guilds. But these trade guilds would gather for more than just talking business. They were known for throwing elaborate, debauched feasts to worship their gods—full of alcohol, food sacrifices, and sexual immorality.

While it seems like the church in Thyatira is making progress (Jesus calls out their love, faith, service, and patience—all virtues we would expect from a maturing Christian community) there is a problem: they, like Pergamum, are falling to the temptation to join in with the pagan worship and sexual immorality that runs rampant in their city.

In particular, John writes in verse 20, “You tolerate that woman, *Jezebel*, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.” John is doing something amazing here, combining references to the Hebrew Scriptures with brilliant commentary on their culture—all in one verse!

You have probably heard the name [Jezebel](#) before. She was a queen of Israel and also the high priestess of worship to a goddess called Asherah. Not only did she promote the worship of pagan gods in Israel, but she was also antagonistic towards Yahweh and his prophets, even going so far as to launch a [manhunt for the prophet Elijah which forced him to flee for his life!](#) Jezebel famously met her end by being cast from a window, and her children were struck dead.

Take a moment to re-read 2:20-23. *Connections should be firing off in our heads between Revelation 2 and these Old Testament stories!*

So who is this “Jezebel” in Thyatira that Jesus refers to? Well, Thyatira was the home of a (clearly unfaithful) Jewish prophetess named Sambathe who dealt in pagan witchcraft and claimed to be a minor oracle. She was closely involved with these labor guilds and their pagan worship practices.

Can you see what is happening here? Just as Israel followed Jezebel into her idolatrous practices, betraying God, some of the Christians in Thyatira were falling to the ever-present temptation to participate in the pagan worship practices of Sambathe and the trade guilds. They are learning “the deep things of Satan” (v.24), which is a clear reference to the so-called underworld oracles proclaimed by Sambathe. And Jesus is calling them out, foretelling that judgment will come to those who betray him like this.

In Pergamum and Thyatira, Christians have grown lax in their theological vigilance. They are not just *tolerating* heresy and idolatry but fooling themselves into thinking that they could remain faithful to God while offering sacrifices to idols and dabbling in pagan rituals. It is clear from these two letters (and, truly, from the story of the Old Testament) that God does not just desire us to love and serve him but to love and serve him **only**.

I find that I need to stop myself from getting on my high horse when I think of these two cities. While our practices may have changed and our sense of morality may have progressed, it is no less true today that idolatry is a prevalent and powerful temptation for Christians that presses in

around us from our culture. For the ancient Israelites, it was Baal and Asherah. For Pergamum and Thyatira it was Caesar and the Roman pantheon. For you and me it might be wealth, influence, relationships, or even our own goals and dreams for our life. An idol can be a pagan god, and it can also be *a good thing that you put first in your life before Jesus*.

May we remain faithful to our God, toppling our idols and repenting when necessary.

– EH

Thursday

We're finishing up the last three of the seven letters—Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Home stretch, friends, and there is some really convicting material to discover today!

Letter to Sardis



Sardis was a very ancient city in the hills (as you can see above) with two mountains, the acropolis and necropolis (city of the dead). The acropolis was where they built their most important buildings and city centers that they wanted to protect, as it is much easier to defend against enemies when they have to fight uphill!

In a way, the geography of the mountains around them reflected their culture because Sardis was known for being obsessed with life, death, and life *after* death. They were fascinated with the afterlife. So it is no accident that Jesus begins his declaration to Sardis saying, “I know your works, You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” This would have been a powerful image for them! It’s like he is saying, “You pretend to be acropolis people, but spiritually, you are more like necropolis people.” Instead of living forever, they were like the walking dead.

His call to this city is to **wake up**, to become spiritually alive again!

Sardis was known in the ancient world as a nearly impenetrable fortress until the mid-500s BC when Cyrus of Persia arrived. His armies went to lay siege to the city, and it seemed that they would fail until a Persian soldier observed a secret one night.

As the story goes, a Persian soldier observed as one of the guards from Sardis, who was supposed to be watching the wall, fell asleep; in his slumber, his head tipped, and his helmet rolled down the mountain. As the Persian soldier watched, the guard appeared out of nowhere, midway down the mountain from a secret passageway, scurried out to retrieve his helmet, and retreated to safety. But the damage was done. By nightfall, Cyrus' troops entered through that secret passageway and invaded the city while its citizens were asleep, and for the first time, the mighty Sardis fell.

Sardis was a city lulled to sleep by a false sense of security, resting on their laurels when they should have remained vigilant. And Jesus declares that the church is like their city. They have fallen asleep, and sin is coming in through the backdoor (or, rather, the secret passageway). It is time for Sardis to wake up!

But not all of the Christians in Sardis are spiritually asleep. Jesus speaks to a faithful remnant, saying, "You have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white for they are worthy."

Marty Solomon presents a compelling theory as to who some of these faithful Christians were. Each year in Sardis, there was a great, multi-week festival celebrating a goddess named Cybele, which culminated in a sacrifice. A large procession of (likely intoxicated) men dressed in white robes would go to the temple to Cybele and those that were brave and devoted enough would make an ultimate sacrifice to her by castrating themselves (gross, I know...it's a [long story](#)). Not everyone would participate, but legend said that even if you got some of the blood of those who did sacrifice on your robe, their blood would count as if it was your own. Not only is this gory, it makes me deeply sad. Can you imagine being a Christian and watching your neighbors throw themselves at a false god with such devotion? They were perpetuating their own brokenness.



Yet, alongside the temple to Cybele, a little building was constructed as a hospital, run by Christians. Scholars believe Christians here in Sardis started a mission-based clinic to care for, heal, and comfort those who had engaged in that pagan worship.

This image has opened my eyes to Jesus' words from verses 4-5: *"And they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels."*

I can't imagine a better picture of what it looks like to be alive amongst the dead, awake amongst the sleeping, healing amidst the broken.

The faithful in Sardis are awake. They recognize the truth that Jesus is the only one who deserves their devotion, but instead of requiring our blood, He shed his. It is his blood on us that makes us clean, that makes us white as snow. He is the only one who can give us a sense of security, and we have to stay vigilant in seeking His ways.

I don't know about you, but I do not naturally trend toward Christlikeness. I have to stay awake so that sin doesn't come in and lurk in the corners of my heart. We have to stay vigilant, placing our trust in the God so gracious that He promises this: one day "I will confess [the names of the faithful] before my Father and before his angels."

May we stay awake and fix our eyes on that future hope, that one day Jesus will stand with us before the Father and say, "This one is mine."

Letter to Philadelphia

Philadelphia was known as "the door to Asia Minor." If you look back at the photo from Monday, you can see the road that precedes northeast toward Asia. When travelers from Asia arrived in Philadelphia, they were entering Asia Minor. But this city known as the "door" was home to another group of Jews who would not welcome Gentile Christians.

Additionally, their region was plagued by violent earthquakes, and Philadelphia had been rebuilt at least two times with help from the empire. As they were rebuilt, their name was changed several times before settling back on "Philadelphia."

With all this context in mind, the letter comes alive. **In a city where some want to shut the door on their Gentile brothers and sisters, Jesus says, "Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut."** In other words, all are welcome to God's family. Jesus tells them to hold fast in the face of what is coming, "so that no one may seize your crown" (a symbol for victory).

He says, to the one who conquers, "I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God." Could this be a nod to a pillar that stands firm though the earth shakes? N.T. Wright takes this to be an acknowledgment of God's people as the new temple, saying, "No stone, no marble will be involved: this, as in the writings of Paul and Peter, is a 'temple' made of living human beings, with Jesus himself as the foundation."

Jesus adds, "I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name." This focus on naming seems to be a nod to the many names of Philadelphia. Jesus will give His faithful ones the only name that truly matters—a name that speaks renewal and restoration to the world. What's more, this whole letter is also riffing off of [Isaiah 45](#), and I really encourage you to read it today if you have time!

Jesus is reminding these Christians in Philadelphia that they represent God, they bear his name, and they are part of bringing God's kingdom to earth—a kingdom with a door open to all people.

Laodicea

Out of all of the letters, this one is probably the most famous. If you have ever heard or used the phrase "Lukewarm Christian," this is where it comes from!

Laodicea was a very wealthy city; it was a vacation destination and popular stopover for soldiers traveling in and out of the nearby military outpost. But it was also known for having bad water.

They received their water from two sources. From the north came water from a hot spring, rich with minerals and healing properties, but by the time that it reached Laodicea, the hot water had cooled. From the South, they received cool refreshing spring water from a snowcap mountain near Colossae, but by the time it reached Laodicea, it had heated up slightly.

I'm sure you get the picture. Made up of cooled-down hot water and heated-up cool water, the water in Laodicea was a lukewarm mess. In fact, it was no good for drinking because of all of the minerals and chemicals inside!

It is this image that Jesus appeals to when he tells Laodicea that they have become complacent. "Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." Traditionally, this passage has been used to say that God wants us to be either in or out—hot or cold— but in reality, both the cold and hot water are *useful*. I think God is saying, "Be healing water or refreshing water but don't be lukewarm water that is useless!"

How were they useless? Well, it seems that in the same way that Sardis had become too comfortable within their fortress, Laodicea had become too comfortable luxuriating in its wealth, and the church there was starting to forget their need for Jesus! And when we get complacent and self-reliant, we are not the images of God (bringing healing and refreshment to the world) that we should be.

Jesus reminds them of their dependence on him with some rather strong language, but he explains that he is doing this out of love! We are always better off when we realize that we are completely dependent on God.

And for those who did, Jesus promises to come knocking on our doors looking to sit and spend time with us. We will be with Him, and He will be with us—an intimate union forever.

– EH

Friday

Friday | Revelation 4:1-11

I have to admit we've done you a bit of a disservice. Chapters 4 and 5 are designed as a duology of sorts—meant to be read together as a pair. Ch. 4 is what we call a “Theophany,” detailing the majesty of God. Ch. 5 is a “Christophany,” detailing the majesty of Jesus Christ. Throughout Revelation, John is going to focus on these two figures, God and Jesus, showing how they are two sides of the same coin and the only objects worthy of our worship and allegiance. In essence, the rest of Revelation flows from these two chapters.

Here's a bit of cultural context that is helpful to know. On important occasions, Roman Emperors would visit a city with great fanfare and anticipation. These visits were called *advents*—meaning arrival. You may recognize the term from when we anticipate Jesus' arrival during Christmas. There were 24 official religions in Rome (Judaism and Christianity *not* among them). As the Emperor arrived the 24 official priests would welcome him with songs of praise and worship wearing white robes and golden crowns. Roman emperors picked different animals to represent their rule (i.e., lions for ferocity, oxen for strength, eagles, etc.). Domitian was the first emperor to insist on being worshiped as a god while he was alive, installing statues of himself in temples and important public spaces. He was deemed “Lord and God” by his imperial cult. As the 24 priests gathered around Domitian upon his arrival they would sing the following hymn: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

For a Christian, you're probably already sensing how problematic the whole scene is. How are these ancient followers of Jesus to cope with this reality? This is the way the world looks to the average Roman citizen, but John's vision is now going to transport them to the very throne room of God to reveal the heavenly perspective of the world.

In a stunning literary display, John will blend cultural images with images from the Hebrew Bible. For example, go read [Exodus 19:16-19](#), where the Israelites encounter God on Mt. Sinai. There is thunder, lighting, and trumpets, images all connected with God's presence. There's a callback to the rainbow from the [covenant God made with Noah](#)—this will be important later when we start talking about judgment. There are 24 elders—significant because it is two sets of twelve. Could this be a sign for the 12 tribes of Israel *plus* the 12 apostles? Or the 12 tribes times two

signifying the addition of the Gentiles in God's family? There's no doubt it's meant to counter the 24 priests of Rome—who also wore white robes with crowns.

Four living creatures surround God's throne (the throne symbolizes God's power and rule). The creatures' descriptions are a blend of [Ezekiel 1](#) and [Isaiah 6](#). They have eyes everywhere (they are wise because they can see all things). Notice the choice of animals—lion, ox, human, eagle—all common symbols of Roman power. Day and night they cry out to God a song from Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"

The 24 elders throw down their crowns, a sign they acknowledge the ultimate rule and authority of the one on the heavenly throne; *He* is the object of their worship and praise, the One who lives and rules forever. They sing, "**Worthy are you, our Lord and God**, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

The general effect of this scene is palpable and there can be no mistaking the message John wants his readers to hear. The BEMA Podcast said it best, it's as if John is saying, "**I've been to the throne room of God and Domitian isn't on it.**"

There is only One worthy of our worship. There is only One who sits on the throne of Heaven, the One whom all earthly rulers will bow down to eventually. There is only One God who ought to be the object of our worship, the God Almighty who created us, loves us deeply, and (as we will uncover next week) has the power and plan to bring renewal and restoration to the whole world.

What other Empires are competing for your attention and affection? Who or what else is calling you to worship? What do you find yourself, perhaps even unknowingly, bowing down to?

John's voice echoes through the ages, reminding us to refocus our hearts toward the only One who is worthy. May we answer the call to lay down our crowns and fix our eyes on God once more. Amen!

– AJ

Weekly Practice

Revelation 2 and 3 feature seven letters to different churches across Asia Minor. Each letter features both encouragement and challenge from Jesus that takes into account what the city was facing culturally and spiritually. What do you think Jesus would say to the church in your city today given the chance? Take a moment to sketch out a letter using a similar format as Revelation.

- Start by identifying what makes your city unique.
- What words of encouragement would Jesus have to say to your city?
- What words of challenge do you think he would offer?
- How do you think Jesus would call your city to persevere or conquer?

After you finish, spend a few minutes praying over your city specifically using the encouragements and challenges you've identified in your letter.

Reflection Questions

- What words come to mind for you when you think about the book of Revelation? What experiences (positive, negative, or neutral) have you had with this book?
- What stuck out to you about the reading from this week? Was there a verse or idea that was particularly meaningful or challenging for you?
- Put yourself in the shoes of an ancient Christian living in Rome. How difficult would it be to not give into the worship of other gods so you could participate in everyday life? Do you think there are elements of this dynamic still at work today? How so?
- Think about the words of encouragement and challenge to the seven churches. Which do you identify with most? What specific acts and attitudes receive Jesus' encouragement? What specific compromises does Jesus expose? What are the dangers of these compromises?
- What other "empires" are competing for your attention and affection today? Who or what calls you to worship?
- What does it mean for you to put God on the throne of your life (the one ultimately in control)? Who or what currently occupies that seat?

Resources

- [Visual Guide to Reading Revelation](#) | Alex Johnston | PDF
- [Guide to Revelation](#) | The Bible Project | Webpage
- [Revelation Overview \(Ch. 1-11\)](#) | The Bible Project | Video
- [Revelation Class](#) | Teaching Series with Rev. Walt Marcum
- [Reading Revelation Responsibly](#) | Michael J. Gorman | Commentary
- [Revelation for Everyone](#) | N.T. Wright | Commentary
- [5 Strategies for Reading Apocalyptic Literature](#) | The Bible Project | Podcast
- [Are You Ready For An Apocalypse?](#) | The Bible Project | Article
- [Revelation: A Book For Its Time](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Ephesus and Their First Love](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Smyrna and Their Crown](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Pergamum and Satan's Throne](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Thyritira and Her Jezebel](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Waking Up in Sardis](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Philadelphia and Their New Name](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: Lukewarm Laodicea](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Revelation: The Throne Room](#) | BEMA Discipleship Podcast
- [Heaven and Earth Theme Video](#) | The Bible Project | Video