THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The King Who Makes All Things New

Revelation, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

The King Who Makes All Things New: The Book of Revelation, Unfiltered

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Pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence in the author's own words. Inside Scripture quotations, capitalization and wording follow the 2011 NIV exactly.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

If you've read the earlier books in this series, you know the saying by now: "If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all." It's been in every book. Here's a confession: nobody knows it all about Revelation. Some of the smartest Christians who ever lived have admitted they were puzzled by it. So you're in good company.

Revelation is the last book of the Bible, and probably the most misunderstood. Some people are terrified of it. Some people ignore it. Some people turn it into a code for predicting the news, and some people make movies about it. But Revelation wasn't written to scare you or to give you a puzzle. It was written to give hope to Christians who were small, poor, and under pressure, by showing them who was really in charge.

Yes, it's full of strange things: a lamb with seven eyes, a dragon with seven heads, horsemen, locusts with human faces, a woman dressed in the sun, a beast whose number is 666, and a city made of gold. But there's a key that unlocks it. Most of these images are symbols, and most of them come from the Old Testament. Once you learn to read them, Revelation becomes less like a horror movie and more like a giant painting of the greatest story ever told.

And at the center of the painting is Jesus, pictured as a Lamb who was killed and is alive again, standing on the throne of the universe. Everything else revolves around Him.

This is the last book in this series. We started with Matthew's family tree and we end with a new heaven and new earth. So take a deep breath, open your Bible, and don't be afraid. That's actually one of the first things Jesus says in this book. Let's go.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Revelation in nine chapters, each covering a major section of John's vision: Jesus among the lampstands (Revelation 1), the letters to seven churches (2–3), the throne room and the Lamb (4–5), the seals (6–7), the trumpets (8–11), the woman, the dragon, and the beasts (12–14), the bowls and the fall of Babylon (15–18), the rider on the white horse and the thousand years (19–20), and the new heaven and new earth (21–22).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Revelation is, how its numbers, colors, and creatures work, who John was and why he was on an island, and the main ways Christians have interpreted it. Read it first. It will save you a lot of confusion.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the New International Version (NIV), the same translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (pronouns for God are capitalized in the author's own words out of reverence; inside Scripture quotations, capitalization follows the NIV exactly); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to read the timeline, what the thousand years means, and the rapture, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes Revelation in places and

explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Read each section of Revelation first, then the chapter here. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It completes a series that has walked through the whole New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Revelation can frighten young readers, and it has often been used to frighten them. This book aims to do the opposite. It explains apocalyptic writing as a genre, shows how its numbers, colors, and creatures draw on the Old Testament, and keeps attention on the book's center: the Lamb who was slain and now reigns. A gentle box encourages anxious readers to talk with a trusted adult, and reminds them that anxiety is not a sign of weak faith.

Christians read Revelation in different ways. The four main interpretive approaches (preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist), the three main views of the millennium (premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial), and the main views of the rapture are presented fairly, without endorsing one. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why others see it differently.

The number 666 is explained with the ancient practice of gematria and the widely discussed connection with Nero, along with the early variant reading 616. A box cautions against date-setting and against

fear of accidentally receiving the mark of the beast. Babylon is explained as Rome and as a picture of proud, oppressive empire in every age.

Throughout, the worship scenes and hymns of Revelation are highlighted, along with passages that have shaped Christian worship for centuries. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the New International Version (NIV).

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will finish this book, and this series, less afraid of the future and more in love with the Lamb who holds it.

Grace and peace,
Bill McLeod
Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE LETTER

Setting the Scene

Revelation, Not Revelations

First, a small thing that's a big giveaway. The book is called Revelation, singular. People who say Revelations usually haven't read it. The first word of the book in Greek is apokalypsis, which means an unveiling, like pulling a curtain back so you can see what's really there. That's where we get the word apocalypse. Today apocalypse means the end of the world, with zombies or asteroids. But in the Bible it means a revealing. Revelation pulls back the curtain on the world so you can see what's really going on behind the headlines: God is on His throne, and Jesus is winning.

Three Kinds of Book in One

Revelation is three kinds of writing rolled into one. It's an apocalypse, a type of Jewish writing full of visions, angels, and symbols, like parts of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah. It's a prophecy, a message from God that calls people to faithfulness, not just predictions about the future (1:3). And it's a letter, addressed to seven real churches in what is now western Turkey (1:4). Whatever else it means, it had to make sense to those first readers. That's a good rule to start with: before you ask what Revelation means for the news tonight, ask what it meant for a Christian in Ephesus in the first century.

Apocalyptic Writing

Apocalyptic writing was popular among Jews from about 200 BC to AD 100. It usually came in times of crisis, when God's people were suffering under powerful empires. It used vivid, sometimes bizarre symbols, often explained by an angel. It showed the struggle between good and evil on a cosmic scale. And it promised that God would soon step in, judge evil, and rescue His people. Daniel 7 is a great example: four beasts come out of the sea, representing four empires, and then a figure like a son of man receives an everlasting kingdom from God. If you read Daniel 7 before Revelation, you'll understand Revelation much better.

Apocalyptic writing works like a political cartoon. A cartoonist might draw a country as an eagle or a bear, or a company as an octopus. Nobody thinks the cartoon is a photograph. But everybody understands the point. The symbols aren't less true than a photograph. In some ways they're more true, because they show what things are really like underneath.

Reading the Symbols

Here's the most important tip for reading Revelation: don't picture it like a movie; picture what it means. Take the Lamb in chapter 5, with seven horns and seven eyes. If you try to draw it, it looks like a monster. But horns in the Bible stand for power, eyes stand for knowledge, and seven stands for completeness. So the Lamb has all power and knows everything. That's not scary. That's wonderful.

Often Revelation explains its own symbols. The seven stars stand for the churches' angels, and the lampstands are the churches themselves (1:20). The dragon is Satan (12:9). The waters are peoples and nations (17:15). The woman is the great city (17:18).

When it doesn't explain a symbol, the Old Testament usually does. Revelation never formally quotes the Old Testament, but scholars count hundreds of allusions to it, more than any other New Testament book. John's mind was soaked in Scripture.

Numbers

Numbers in Revelation are mostly symbols, not math. Seven, the most important number, means completeness or perfection, like the seven days of creation. That's why there are seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. Four stands for the whole world, as in the four corners or four winds of the earth. Twelve stands for God's people, from the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. Ten often means fullness. Three and a half, which also appears as forty-two months, 1,260 days, or three and a half "times," is half of seven: a limited, broken period of trouble that won't last forever. A thousand means a vast number. So 144,000 is twelve times twelve times a thousand: the complete people of God, as big as it could possibly be. And 666, as we'll see, may be a name in code. Some Christians take more of the numbers literally; most agree that many of them are symbolic.

Colors

Colors carry meaning too. White stands for victory, purity, and holiness, so Jesus has white hair and the saints wear white robes. Red stands for war and bloodshed, like the red horse and the red dragon. Black stands for famine and mourning. The fourth horse is pale, a sickly green-gray, the color of a corpse, and its rider is named Death. Purple and scarlet were the colors of royalty and luxury, so Babylon is dressed in them. Gold stands for value and glory, so the throne room and the new Jerusalem shine with it.

Creatures

Revelation is full of creatures. The Lamb is Jesus, the sacrifice for sin, like the Passover lamb. The Lion from Judah's tribe is Jesus too, the promised King from David's family. The dragon is Satan. The beast from the sea seems to represent an oppressive political power, and the beast from the earth (also called the false prophet) seems to represent the religion and propaganda that support it. The four living creatures around God's throne look like a lion, an ox, a human, and an eagle, echoing visions in Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. They seem to represent all of creation worshiping God. Locusts, frogs, and horses echo the plagues of Egypt and the warnings of the prophets. Once you see that the creatures are characters in a story, not monsters in a nightmare, they're much less frightening.

Who Wrote It?

The writer calls himself John four times (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), but he never says which John. Early Christian writers, like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus in the second century, said it was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, who also wrote the Gospel of John. That's been the traditional view. But in the third century, Dionysius, a bishop of Alexandria, noticed that the Greek of Revelation is very different from the Greek of John's Gospel, and suggested it was written by a different John. Some scholars today think it was John the Elder, whom we met in the books on John's letters, or another prophet named John. Others think the differences come from the different kind of writing, or from John writing without a secretary in exile. Whoever he was, his first readers knew exactly who he was, and trusted him.

Patmos

John says he ended up on Patmos, an island, on account of God's word and his testimony about Jesus (1:9). Patmos is a small, rocky island in the Aegean Sea, about 35 miles off the coast of what is now Turkey, roughly 13 square miles in size. The Romans sometimes sent troublemakers into exile on islands like this. Early tradition says John was exiled there for preaching about Jesus, and later released. Today, visitors to Patmos can see a cave where, according to tradition, John received his vision. Picture an old man, separated from the churches he loved, staring at the sea, when suddenly heaven opens.

When Was It Written?

Most scholars date Revelation to around AD 95, near the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian. That's what Irenaeus said, writing around AD 180. Others date it earlier, around AD 68, during or just after the reign of Nero, who had persecuted Christians in Rome in AD 64. Both dates have good arguments. Either way, the readers lived under the shadow of the Roman Empire, which was the most powerful empire the world had ever seen.

Domitian and the Emperor Cult

Domitian ruled from AD 81 to 96. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, he liked to be addressed as "our Lord and God." Across the province of Asia, cities competed to build temples to the emperors and to the goddess Roma. Emperor worship was part of everyday life: festivals, sports, trade guild meetings, and city celebrations often included sacrifices or honors to the emperor. Refusing to join in made you look disloyal, even dangerous. Historians debate how much official persecution there was under

Domitian. It seems that most of the pressure was local: losing customers, being shut out of trade guilds, being reported to officials, or facing mobs. At least one Christian, Antipas, had already been killed (2:13). Revelation was written to Christians facing that pressure, and its message was simple: Caesar is not Lord. Jesus is.

The Seven Churches

Revelation was sent to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in what is now western Turkey: Ephesus first, then Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia, ending with Laodicea. They're listed in the order a messenger would visit them, traveling in a loop along the Roman roads. These were real cities with real problems. You can still visit their ruins today. We'll look at each one in chapter 2.

Four Ways to Read Revelation

Christians have read Revelation in four main ways. Each has been held by faithful, Bible-loving Christians.

The preterist view (from a Latin word meaning past) says most of Revelation was fulfilled in the first centuries, in events like the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the persecution and eventual fall of pagan Rome. Most preterists still believe Jesus will return in the future, as chapters 19–22 describe.

The historicist view says Revelation is a map of church history from the first century to the end, so its events can be matched to events in history. Many Protestant Reformers read it this way, often identifying the beast with the papacy, a view most Protestants today don't hold.

The futurist view says that most of Revelation, from chapter 4 on, describes events still to come, at the end of history: a great tribulation, the Antichrist, and the return of Christ. This view is popular among many evangelical Christians today.

The idealist view says Revelation isn't mainly about specific events, but shows timeless truths about the battle between God and evil, in every age, and God's final victory.

Many Christians combine these views. They think Revelation spoke first to its own time, speaks to every age, and also points to a final future victory. As we go, I'll note how the different views read key passages.

The Thousand Years and the Rapture

Revelation 20 mentions a thousand-year reign, called the millennium. Christians hold three main views about it, which we'll look at in chapter 8: premillennial (Jesus returns before a thousand-year reign on earth), postmillennial (Jesus returns after a long period when the gospel transforms the world), and amillennial (the thousand years is a symbol for the present age between Jesus' first and second coming).

Many Christians also believe in the rapture, when believers will be caught up to meet the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The word comes from the Latin translation of caught up. Christians agree that Jesus will return and gather His people. They disagree about when the gathering happens. Some believe it will happen before a seven-year tribulation (pre-tribulation), some in the middle (mid-tribulation), and some at the end, when Jesus returns visibly (post-tribulation). Many Christians, especially amillennial and postmillennial ones, don't think of the rapture as a separate event at all, but as part of

Jesus' single return. The pre-tribulation view became widespread through the teaching of John Nelson Darby in the 1800s, and later through popular books and movies. Revelation itself never uses the word rapture, so each view rests on how you connect Revelation with other passages.

If the End Times Scare You

Some teens get really scared reading Revelation, or hearing people talk about the end of the world. Maybe you've lain awake worrying about being left behind, or about wars, disasters, or the mark of the beast. If that's you, here's what I want you to know. Being anxious doesn't mean your faith is weak. Anxiety is a real thing that happens in your body and mind, and lots of strong Christians struggle with it. You don't have to handle it alone. Talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, youth leader, pastor, or school counselor. If the worry is constant, or it keeps you from sleeping, eating, or enjoying life, ask for help from a doctor or counselor too. And remember what Revelation was written to do: it was written to comfort frightened Christians, not to frighten comfortable ones. The first thing Jesus says to John in this book is: Do not be afraid (1:17).

The Map

Chapter 1 (Revelation 1): Jesus among the lampstands.

Chapter 2 (Revelation 2–3): Letters to seven real churches.

Chapter 3 (Revelation 4–5): The throne room and the Lamb.

Chapter 4 (Revelation 6–7): The seals, and a multitude no one can count.

Chapter 5 (Revelation 8–11): The trumpets and the two witnesses.

Chapter 6 (Revelation 12–14): The woman, the dragon, and the beasts.

Chapter 7 (Revelation 15–18): The bowls and the fall of Babylon.

Chapter 8 (Revelation 19–20): The rider on the white horse and the thousand years.

Chapter 9 (Revelation 21–22): A new heaven and new earth.

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CHAPTER 1

The Jesus You Didn't Expect

Revelation 1

Revelation begins by telling you what it is and where it came from. It's an unveiling that comes from Jesus Christ. God gave it to Jesus, Jesus sent it through an angel to John, and John wrote down everything he saw. So this isn't John's guesswork about the future. It's a message passed down a chain, from God, through Jesus, to John, to the churches, and finally to you.

John says the message is about things that must happen soon. That little word soon has puzzled readers for two thousand years. Preterists say it shows that much of the book was about to be fulfilled in John's own day. Others point out that in God's eyes a thousand years is like a day (2 Peter 3:8), or that soon means the end could come at any time, so we should always be ready. Whatever your view, soon means this book was meant to matter to its very first readers, not just to people living two thousand years later.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Only Book with a Built-In Blessing**
> Revelation is the only book of the Bible that begins by promising a blessing to the people who read it: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near." Notice three things. First, it was meant to be read aloud, in church, to a group of people who couldn't own their own copies. Imagine sitting in a house church in Ephesus and hearing the whole

> thing in about an hour and a half. Second, the blessing isn't for people who crack the code. It's for people who take it to heart, who live differently because of it. Third, there are seven blessings in Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14). Of course there are seven.

Like any letter, Revelation begins with a greeting. John writes to the seven churches in Asia, and he sends them grace and peace from three sources. First, from God, the one who is, who was, and who is still to come. That's a fresh way of describing God's name, the I AM of Exodus 3:14. God isn't stuck in the past or limited to the present. He owns the future too. Second, from the seven spirits who stand before God's throne. Third, from Jesus Christ.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Seven Spirits**
>
> Who are the seven spirits? Some think they're seven high-ranking angels. But most Christians have understood them as a symbolic way of describing the Holy Spirit in His fullness, since seven means completeness and they're listed between God the Father and Jesus. Isaiah 11:2 describes the Spirit resting on the Messiah in a sevenfold way, and Zechariah 4 links seven lamps with God's Spirit. If that's right, John's greeting comes from the whole Trinity: Father, Spirit, and Son.

John then gives Jesus three titles. He is the faithful witness, who told the truth about God even when it cost Him His life. He is the firstborn from the dead, the first to rise to a resurrection life that will never end, with many more to follow. And He is ruler of every earthly king, including the emperor in Rome, though the emperor didn't know it yet.

That makes John burst into praise. He praises Jesus, who loves us, who has released us from our sins at the cost of His own blood, and who has turned us into a kingdom, a people of priests serving God.

Notice that loves is present tense. Jesus didn't just love us once on the cross. He loves you right now.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A Kingdom of Priests**
>
> When God rescued Israel from Egypt, He told them they would be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). Peter used the same idea for Christians (1 Peter 2:9). A priest stands between God and people, bringing people to God and representing God to people. John says that's what Jesus has made every believer, not just pastors, but the teenager in the back row. Revelation is going to describe a world where empires claim to rule everything. Before it gets there, John reminds his readers that they already belong to a better kingdom.

Then John announces the theme of the whole book. Jesus will come on the clouds, and every person will see Him, including the very people who pierced Him. All the peoples of the earth will mourn over Him. John is blending two Old Testament prophecies: Daniel 7:13, where a figure like a son of man arrives on heaven's clouds, and Zechariah 12:10, where people mourn for the one they pierced. Jesus used the same picture to describe His return (Matthew 24:30).

Then God Himself speaks, for one of only two times in the whole book (the other is 21:5–8).

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Alpha and Omega**
>
> Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and omega is the last. So when God says He's the Alpha and the Omega, it's like saying He's the A and the Z, and everything in between. He was there before anything began, and He'll be there when everything is finished. Later in the book, Jesus uses exactly the same title for Himself (22:13). The early Christians took that as a clear statement that Jesus shares God's identity. In old churches, you'll often see the Greek letters alpha and omega carved on either side of a cross.

John introduces himself not as an apostle, a bishop, or an important leader, but as his readers' brother, and their partner in three things: suffering, the kingdom, and patient endurance. Those three words sum up the Christian life in Revelation. You belong to God's kingdom now, but you live in a world that often opposes it, so you need endurance. John was living it. He had been sent to Patmos, a small, rocky island in the Aegean Sea, because he preached God's word and testified about Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Lord's Day**
>
> John says his vision came on the Lord's Day. This is the earliest time that phrase is used for Sunday, the day Jesus rose from the dead. Christians gathered to worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). So John, alone on his island, was keeping Sunday, probably at the same time his churches were gathering on the mainland. And that's when heaven opened. The Roman emperors had special days named in their honor. The Christians had a day that belonged to their Lord.

John says he was in the Spirit, which means God's Spirit took hold of him and gave him a vision. Behind him, a voice as loud as a trumpet blast, told him to write down what he saw on a scroll and send it to seven churches, which it named one by one.

John turned to see who was speaking. First he saw seven golden lampstands, and in the middle of them, a figure who looked like a son of man. Then John describes Him, piece by piece. Remember the rule: picture what it means, not what it looks like.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Reading the Portrait**
>
> Each detail of the portrait comes from the Old Testament, and each one means something. His long robe and the golden sash across His chest are what a priest or a king would wear. His hair is white like wool or snow, like the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9, which means He shares God's eternal wisdom and holiness. His eyes are like flames, seeing straight through everything. His

feet glow like bronze heated in a furnace, strong and unshakable. His voice is like the roar of a waterfall or the ocean, a sound that drowns out everything else. In His right hand He holds seven stars, which means He holds the churches' fate in His hand. A sharp, two-edged sword comes out of His mouth, which means His words have power to judge and to cut to the heart (Hebrews 4:12). And His face shines like the sun at full strength, like Jesus on the mountain of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:2). This isn't the gentle Jesus of a children's picture book. It's the risen Lord in all His glory.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Son of Man**

The phrase son of man can simply mean a human being. But in Daniel 7:13–14, a figure like a son of man arrives on the clouds at God's throne and receives authority, glory, and a kingdom that will never end. Jesus called Himself the Son of Man more than any other title, and He connected it with Daniel's vision (Mark 14:62). So when John sees a figure like a son of man, he's seeing the human Jesus who is also the divine King.

John's response was to collapse at Jesus' feet like a dead man. That's how people in the Bible usually react to seeing God's glory (Isaiah 6:5; Ezekiel 1:28; Daniel 10:9). But then Jesus did something tender. He put His right hand on John, the same hand that holds the stars. And He said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 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."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Keys**

Keys mean authority. Whoever has the keys decides who goes in and who comes out. Hades was the Greek word for the realm of the dead, the grave. Some ancient people imagined it as a prison with locked gates. Jesus says He holds those keys. He went into death and came out again, and now He has authority over it. That's the reason He can tell John not to be afraid. Whatever happens in the rest of this book, whatever happens in your life, death doesn't get the last word. Jesus does.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Do Not Be Afraid**

Remember this. Before Revelation shows a single beast or plague, Jesus says, Do not be afraid. That's how you should read the rest of the book. It's not meant to fill you with dread. It's meant to show you that the one who loves you holds the keys to everything. If you feel scared reading Revelation, come back to this verse. Feel His hand on your shoulder.

Jesus told John to write about what he had seen, what is happening now, and what will happen later. Some interpreters see this as an outline of the book: what John saw (chapter 1), what is (chapters 2–3, the churches), and what comes later (chapters 4–22). Others think the whole book mixes past, present, and future.

Then Jesus explained the mystery of the stars and lampstands. The seven lampstands stand for the seven churches. The stars stand for the angels of the churches.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Angels of the Churches?**

Who are these angels of the churches? Christians have suggested three main answers. They might be guardian angels assigned to each church. They might be the churches' human leaders or messengers, since the Greek word angelos simply means messenger. Or they might be a way of describing the spiritual character of each church. Whichever is right, the picture is comforting. Jesus walks among the lampstands. He's not distant from His churches. He's right in the middle of them, even when they're small and struggling. And a lampstand doesn't make its own light. It holds a light up so others can see. That's what a church is for.

KEY VERSE

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

Revelation 1:8 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What did you expect Revelation to be like before you started reading it? Has chapter 1 changed that?
2. Which detail in John's description of Jesus stands out most to you? What does it say about who He is?
3. Why do you think Jesus' first words to John were "Do not be afraid"?
4. John was alone on an island when he saw this vision. When have you felt isolated? How might this chapter speak to that?

TRY THIS *Read Revelation 1 aloud, the way its first hearers would have heard it. Then read Daniel 7. Make a list of every connection you can find between the two chapters.*

CHAPTER 2

Letters to Real Cities

Revelation 2–3

Now Jesus dictates seven short letters, one to each church. Remember, these were real churches in real cities, about forty to fifty miles apart, linked by Roman roads. A messenger carrying the scroll would have traveled in a loop: from Ephesus north to Smyrna and Pergamum, then southeast to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Pattern**

Most of the letters follow the same pattern. Jesus introduces Himself with a detail from the vision in chapter 1. He says, I know, and describes what's going on in the church. He gives praise, criticism, or both. He calls them to repent or hold on. He says that whoever has ears should listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, plural. That means each church was supposed to read all seven letters. And He makes a promise to whoever is victorious, or overcomes. Notice what's missing: two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia, receive no criticism at all. Two, Sardis and Laodicea, receive almost no praise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Seven Eras of Church History?**

Some Christians, especially in the historicist and dispensational traditions, have read the seven churches as a preview of seven periods of church history, beginning with the apostolic church (Ephesus) and ending with a lukewarm church in the last days (Laodicea). Most interpreters think the letters were written to seven real churches of John's time, and that, because seven means completeness, they also speak to every church in every age. Either way, every

church today can find itself somewhere in these letters. So can every Christian.

Jesus writes first to Ephesus. He praises the church for its hard work, its endurance, and its refusal to put up with evil people. They had tested people who claimed to be apostles and caught them lying. They had kept going through hardship for Jesus' sake without giving up. But then comes the hard part: "You have forsaken the love you had at first."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Ephesus**

Ephesus was the biggest and most important city in the province of Asia, with perhaps two hundred thousand people. It had a great harbor, a huge theater that held about twenty-five thousand people, and the temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Paul had spent more than two years there, and his preaching nearly caused a riot among silversmiths who made idols of Artemis (Acts 19). Paul wrote Ephesians to the church, and tradition says John spent his last years there. Ephesus's harbor was slowly filling up with silt from the river, and the city eventually declined. Today its ruins are miles from the sea. A lampstand can be removed.

What does it mean to lose your first love? It may mean their love for Jesus had cooled, or their love for each other, or both. They were so focused on being right that they forgot to be loving. Jesus tells them to remember where they fell from, turn around, and go back to doing the things they did at the start. If not, He'll come and remove their lampstand, meaning the church would stop existing.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Right but Cold**

The church in Ephesus did lots of things right. They worked hard. They had good theology. They could spot a fake teacher a mile away. But they had lost the love. It's possible to be completely right about the Bible and still miss the point. Paul said that without love, even the most impressive spiritual gifts are just noise (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). If your faith has become all rules and

arguments, ask Jesus to light the fire again. And notice His remedy: go back to what you did at first. Sometimes feelings follow actions. Start praying, reading, serving, and loving again, and the love often returns.

Jesus also praises them for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans. We don't know much about this group. Early writers like Irenaeus linked them with Nicolas, one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6:5, but that's uncertain. From the letter to Pergamum, it seems they taught that Christians could eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. In other words, they taught a way to fit in with pagan culture. Notice that Jesus hates their practices, not the people.

The letter to Smyrna is all encouragement. Jesus introduces Himself as the one who died and then came back to life. He knows their suffering and poverty, but they're actually rich. He knows the slander they face from some in the local synagogue. And He tells them not to be afraid of what's coming. Some will be thrown into prison, and they'll suffer for ten days. Then He says: "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Smyrna**

Smyrna, today the city of Izmir in Turkey, was a beautiful, wealthy port city about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus. It was fiercely loyal to Rome, and in AD 26 it won the honor of building a temple to the emperor Tiberius. Its buildings circled the top of a hill called Mount Pagos, and people called this ring of buildings the crown of Smyrna. So when Jesus promises the believers a crown, they would have smiled. Around AD 155, Polycarp, the elderly bishop of Smyrna, who according to tradition had known John, was burned alive for refusing to call Caesar Lord. When he was ordered to curse Christ, he said that he had served Christ for eighty-six years, and Christ had never done him wrong, so how could he blaspheme his King who saved him?

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Synagogue of Satan?**

Jesus' words about people claiming to be Jews who are not have sometimes been twisted to justify hatred of Jewish people. That is a terrible misuse of this passage. John was Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. The earliest Christians were Jewish. This was a sharp disagreement within a local community in which some synagogue members were reporting Christians to the Roman authorities, putting their lives at risk. It's not a statement about Jewish people in general, and it never gives anyone permission to hate or mistreat anyone. Christians have a shameful history of antisemitism, and we must reject it completely.

What about the ten days? Like most numbers in Revelation, it's probably symbolic: a short, limited time of suffering. Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days (Daniel 1:12). The point is that the suffering would be real, but it would have a limit, and Jesus would be with them through it.

Jesus introduces Himself to Pergamum as the one with the sharp two-edged sword. He knows they live where Satan's throne is. Yet they've held on to His name and didn't deny their faith, even when Antipas, Jesus' faithful witness, was killed in their city.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Pergamum**

Pergamum (also spelled Pergamon) had been a royal capital, and it was perched on a hill about a thousand feet high. It had a library of about two hundred thousand scrolls, second only to Alexandria's. Parchment, writing material made from animal skin, is named after the city. What was Satan's throne? There are three main suggestions. On the hilltop stood a huge altar of Zeus, shaped like a throne; today it's in a museum in Berlin. Pergamum also had a famous healing center dedicated to Asclepius, whose symbol was a snake. And it was the first city in Asia to build a temple to a living emperor, Augustus, in 29 BC. The emperor cult was probably what put believers in the most danger.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Antipas**

We know nothing about Antipas except this verse. He's the only Christian martyr named in Revelation. But notice what Jesus calls him: My faithful witness. That's the same title Jesus has in 1:5. The Greek word for witness is martys, which eventually came to mean martyr, someone who witnesses to Jesus even to death. Antipas is forgotten by history, but Jesus knows his name.

But there's a problem. Some in the church were following the teaching of Balaam, who showed Balak how to lead Israel into idolatry and sexual sin (Numbers 25; 31:16), and some held to the Nicolaitans' teaching. In Pergamum, eating meat sacrificed to idols was part of social life, trade guild dinners, and civic festivals. Refusing would cost you. Jesus calls them to repent.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hidden Manna and a White Stone**

To those who overcome, Jesus promises hidden manna and a white stone inscribed with a new name. Manna was the bread God gave Israel in the desert, and Jewish tradition said a jar of manna was hidden away until the Messiah came. Instead of idol feasts, believers would eat God's food. The white stone has many possible meanings. In ancient courts, jurors voted with white stones for not guilty and black stones for guilty. White stones were also used as tickets to banquets. And a new name means a new identity. Whatever exactly it refers to, it means you're accepted, welcomed, and known by Jesus personally.

The longest letter goes to the smallest city, Thyatira. Jesus introduces Himself as the Son of God, the only time that title appears in Revelation, with eyes like fire and feet like polished bronze. He praises their love, faith, service, and endurance, and says they're doing more now than at first. That's the opposite of Ephesus. But they tolerated a woman He calls Jezebel, who called

herself a prophet and was leading people into sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Thyatira**

Thyatira was a busy trading town famous for its trade guilds, more than any other city in the region: wool workers, linen workers, dyers, leather workers, potters, bakers, slave dealers, and bronze smiths. Lydia, the businesswoman Paul met in Philippi, was a dealer in purple cloth from Thyatira (Acts 16:14). Each guild had a patron god and held feasts in its honor. If you wanted to make a living, you were expected to join a guild and attend its feasts. That's why Jezebel's teaching was so appealing. She probably said it was fine for Christians to go along with it. The city's own god was Apollo, called a son of Zeus, so it's striking that Jesus calls Himself the Son of God here. Thyatira was also known for its bronze work.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Jezebel?**

Jezebel was probably not this woman's real name. The original Jezebel was a queen of Israel who led the nation into the worship of Baal (1 Kings 16:31; 2 Kings 9:22). Jesus uses her name as a label, the way we might call someone a Judas. This woman was a real leader in the church who claimed to speak for God. Jesus had given her time to repent, but she refused. Notice the patience: even for a false prophet leading people astray, Jesus gave time to turn around. But He also warned that He searches hearts and minds and gives to each according to what they've done.

To those who don't follow her teaching, Jesus gives no extra burden. They should just hold on until He comes. To those who overcome, He promises authority over the nations, and the morning star. Later, Jesus calls Himself the bright Morning Star (22:16). The greatest reward isn't power. It's Jesus Himself.

Jesus' words to Sardis are some of the most chilling in the Bible. He knows their deeds; they have a reputation for being alive, but they're dead. He tells them to wake up and strengthen what little is

left, before it dies too. If they don't wake up, He'll come like a thief, when they least expect it.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Sardis**
>
> Sardis had once been one of the richest cities in the world, the capital of King Croesus, whose name became a byword for wealth. Gold was found in the river that flowed through it. Its fortress sat on a steep hill that seemed impossible to attack. But it was captured twice, by the Persian king Cyrus in 547 BC and by Antiochus III in 214 BC, both times because soldiers climbed the cliffs at night and found that no one was keeping watch. Wake up! would have hit hard in Sardis. By John's time it was living on its past glory. An earthquake in AD 17 had badly damaged it, and it had been rebuilt with help from the emperor Tiberius.
>
> BACKGROUND CHECK **Reputation vs. Reality**
>
> The church in Sardis looked good. Maybe it had great programs, a big crowd, and a good name in town. But Jesus saw what was underneath. It's possible to look like a strong Christian on social media or at youth group and be spiritually asleep on the inside. Jesus isn't impressed by reputation. He looks at hearts. If you've drifted, don't despair. Jesus says wake up, not give up. He still says there are a few in Sardis who haven't soiled their clothes, and they'll walk with Him in white.

He promises that He will never erase the name of anyone who overcomes from the book of life. Ancient cities kept a register of citizens, and a citizen's name could be erased if they committed a crime or died. Jesus' register is different. Your name is safe with Him.

Philadelphia means brotherly love. This church, like Smyrna, receives only praise. Jesus introduces Himself as the holy and true one, who holds David's key. When He opens a door, nobody can close it, and when He closes one, nobody can open it (an echo of Isaiah 22:22). Then He says: "See, I have placed before you an open

door that no one can shut." They had little strength, but they'd kept His word and hadn't denied His name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Philadelphia**

Philadelphia was a younger city, founded in the second century BC by a king named Attalus II, whose love for his brother earned him the nickname Philadelphus. It sat at the edge of a high plateau on an important road leading east, which made it a gateway, a kind of open door, for spreading Greek culture inland. It was in an earthquake zone, and after the great earthquake of AD 17, aftershocks went on for years. Many people lived outside the city in tents, afraid that buildings would fall on them. So Jesus' promise to make the overcomers pillars in God's temple, which they would never have to leave, would have meant a lot. The city was renamed Neocaesarea in honor of the emperor for a while. Jesus promises a better new name: God's name, the name of the new Jerusalem, and His own new name.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Little Strength**

Jesus says the church in Philadelphia had little strength. Maybe it was small, poor, or without influence. But that didn't stop Jesus from opening a door for them. The open door may mean an opportunity to share the gospel (1 Corinthians 16:9), or the door into God's kingdom. Either way, you don't need to be strong or important for Jesus to use you. You just need to stay faithful.

Jesus also promises to keep them from the hour of trial coming on the whole world. Christians interpret this in different ways. Pre-tribulation readers see a promise that believers will be removed from the earth before a great tribulation. Others see it as a promise of protection through the trial, not removal from it, just as Jesus prayed that the Father would protect His followers from the evil one, not take them out of the world (John 17:15). In context, it's a promise that this little church would be kept safe by Jesus.

The last letter is the most famous, and the most uncomfortable. Jesus introduces Himself as the Amen, the true and faithful witness,

the one who rules over all God created. And He doesn't have one good word to say: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Background Check: Laodicea**

Laodicea was a wealthy banking and trading city. It was so rich that when an earthquake devastated it in AD 60, it rebuilt without accepting help from Rome. It was famous for a fine black wool and for a medical school known for an eye ointment. But it had a weakness: no good water supply of its own. Water came through an aqueduct from hot springs several miles away, and by the time it arrived, it was lukewarm and full of minerals, the kind of water you'd spit out. Nearby Hierapolis had hot springs, good for healing. Nearby Colossae had cold, refreshing water. Laodicea's water was neither. Every detail of Jesus' letter fits the city: the church claimed to be rich, but Jesus says they're poor, blind, and naked. He tells them to buy from Him gold refined in fire, white clothes, and salve for their eyes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does Lukewarm Mean?**

Many people think hot means on fire for God and cold means against Him, so Jesus would prefer that you hate Him rather than be half-hearted. But the city's water supply suggests a different meaning. Hot water heals, and cold water refreshes. Both are useful. Lukewarm water is useless. So Jesus isn't saying He'd rather you be against Him. He's saying the church was useless, neither healing nor refreshing anyone. They were comfortable, self-satisfied, and making no difference. That's a challenge for any comfortable Christian. Does your faith refresh or help anyone?

Jesus says He rebukes and disciplines those He loves. That's important. Even His harshest letter is written out of love. Then He says the words that have become one of the most famous verses in the Bible.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Behold, I Stand at the Door**

In older translations, Revelation 3:20 begins with the word Behold. The NIV says, Here I am! The verse is often used to invite people to become Christians, as if Jesus is knocking on the door of an unbeliever's heart. That's a fair application, and many people have opened the door to Jesus this way. But look at the context. Jesus is speaking to a church. He's standing outside His own church, knocking, waiting to be let back in. They were so comfortable and self-satisfied that they hadn't noticed He'd been shut out. So the first meaning is a call to complacent Christians: let Jesus back into the center. And the promise is personal. If anyone hears His voice and opens the door, He'll come in and share a meal with them. In the ancient world, eating together meant friendship. Jesus doesn't want to inspect you. He wants to have dinner with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Painting with No Handle**

In the 1850s, the English artist William Holman Hunt painted a famous picture called The Light of the World, based on Revelation 3:20. It shows Jesus at night, holding a lantern, knocking on an overgrown door. People noticed something odd: there's no handle on the outside of the door. The artist explained that this was deliberate. The door can only be opened from the inside. Jesus knocks, but He doesn't force His way in. He waits for you to open it.

To those who overcome, Jesus makes the most amazing promise of all: they'll sit with Him on His throne, just as He overcame and sat with His Father on His throne. The lukewarm, useless church is offered a place on the throne of the universe. That's grace.

KEY VERSE

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Revelation 3:20 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Which of the seven churches is most like your church? Which is most like you?
2. The church in Ephesus was right but cold. How can someone hold on to the truth without losing love?
3. What would it look like for your faith to be hot (healing) or cold (refreshing) for someone this week?
4. How does reading Revelation 3:20 in context change how you understand it?

TRY THIS *Write a short letter to yourself in the style of Jesus' letters. Start with what you think Jesus would praise in your life, then what He'd challenge, and end with one of His promises. Keep it somewhere you'll see it.*

CHAPTER 3

The Throne and the Lamb

Revelation 4–5

After the letters, the scene changes completely. John looks up and sees an open door in heaven. The trumpet-like voice tells him to come up, and he'll be shown what must happen next. Immediately he's in the Spirit, and before him is a throne, with someone sitting on it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Come Up Here**

Some Christians who hold a pre-tribulation view see 4:1 as a picture of the rapture: John, representing the church, is called up to heaven before the judgments begin, and the word church doesn't appear again in chapters 4–19. Others answer that John is simply being taken up in a vision, as prophets like Ezekiel were, and that God's people (called saints, servants, and witnesses) appear all through the rest of the book. Either way, notice what John sees first when the door opens. Before any seals, trumpets, or bowls, he sees a throne. Everything that follows comes from that throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Throne**

The word throne appears more than forty times in Revelation, more than in any other New Testament book. That's the point of the whole book. In John's world, Caesar sat on the throne. But John is shown the real throne room of the universe, and it's not in Rome. Whatever happens on earth, God is still on His throne. When the news is frightening, and your life feels out of control, Revelation 4 is a good chapter to read.

Notice that John doesn't describe the one on the throne. He doesn't try to draw God. He describes only colors and light: He looked like jasper and carnelian (a deep red stone), and around the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. The rainbow is a reminder of God's promise to Noah never to destroy the earth with a flood again (Genesis 9:13). Even in the throne room of judgment, mercy surrounds the throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Twenty-Four Elders**

Around the throne are twenty-four other thrones, with twenty-four elders sitting on them, dressed in white, wearing gold crowns. Who are they? Many think they represent all of God's people from both Testaments: the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles. The new Jerusalem will have the names of both on its gates and foundations (21:12–14). Others think they're a high order of angels who lead heaven's worship, or that they echo the twenty-four divisions of priests in the temple (1 Chronicles 24). Whichever is right, their main job is to worship.

From the throne come lightning and thunder, like at Mount Sinai when God gave the law (Exodus 19:16). Seven blazing lamps stand for God's sevenfold Spirit. In front of the throne is something like a glassy sea, as clear as crystal. In the ancient world, the sea was a symbol of chaos and danger. Here the sea is calm, still, and under control, like a mirror before God's throne.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Living Creatures**

Around the throne are four living creatures, covered with eyes, each with six wings. One is like a lion, one like an ox, one has a human face, and one is like a flying eagle. They combine the creatures of Ezekiel 1 and the seraphim of Isaiah 6. A Jewish saying said that the lion is the noblest of wild animals, the ox the strongest of farm animals, the eagle the swiftest bird, and humans the greatest of all. So the four creatures probably represent all of creation, wild and tame, in the air and on land, worshiping God. Their eyes mean they see

everything. In the second century, Irenaeus connected them with the four Gospels, and in Christian art you'll often see Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John pictured as a human, a lion, an ox, and an eagle.

Day and night, the creatures never stop praising God. They sing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Holy, Holy, Holy**

When Hebrew wanted to make something extra strong, it repeated it. Saying something three times was the strongest way possible. God is not just holy. He is holy, holy, holy, utterly pure, set apart, and beyond anything we can imagine. The seraphim sang the same song in Isaiah 6:3. In 1826, the English bishop Reginald Heber wrote a hymn called Holy, Holy, Holy based on this chapter, and it's still sung all over the world. When you sing it, you're joining a song that's been going on in heaven since before the world began.

And every time the creatures praise God, the elders, all twenty-four, fall down, worship, and throw their crowns before the throne. They sing: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Throwing Down Crowns**

Laying their crowns before the throne means the elders are saying that their crowns, their honor, their authority, everything they have, belong to God. In the Roman world, kings who were defeated by Rome would lay their crowns before the emperor. And according to the Roman historian Tacitus, a Parthian prince once laid his crown before a statue of the emperor Nero. Here, the elders give their crowns not to Caesar but to God. Worship means saying, God, You're worth more than anything I have. What's your crown? Your talents, grades, looks, popularity, plans? What would it look like to lay it before Him?

In chapter 5, John sees a scroll in the right hand of the one on the throne. It has writing on both sides and is sealed with seven seals. The scroll seems to contain God's plan for history, His plan to judge evil and set the world right. A mighty angel shouts out a question: Who has the right to break the seals and unroll the scroll? And no one anywhere in creation, in heaven, on earth, or below it, was able to do it. John cries and cries.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Did John Cry?**

John's tears are important. If no one can open the scroll, then God's plan to set the world right can't go forward. Evil wins. Suffering never ends. The martyrs die for nothing. Have you ever looked at the world, at war, injustice, sickness, or your own pain, and wondered whether anyone can fix it? John felt that. And God doesn't scold him for crying. He answers him.

One of the elders tells John to stop weeping: "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." So John turns to look at the Lion. And here's the most important moment in the whole book. He sees a Lamb.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lion Is a Lamb**

John hears about a Lion, but when he looks, he sees "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne." This is the key to Revelation. The Lion of Judah, the conquering King, wins not by tearing His enemies apart, but by being slaughtered like a sacrificial lamb. Jesus' victory came through the cross. Throughout Revelation, John often hears one thing and then sees another that explains it. Here he hears Lion and sees Lamb. God's power looks like self-giving love. The word Lamb is used for Jesus nearly thirty times in Revelation. It's the main way the book describes Him. Notice too that the Lamb is standing. He was slain, but He is alive.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Center of Everything**

Where is the Lamb standing? In the middle of the throne. Not off to the side. Not in a corner of the room. If you're ever confused by Revelation, lost among the beasts and bowls and plagues, come back to this picture. The Lamb who was slain is at the center of the universe. The future isn't controlled by dictators, chance, or the devil. It's controlled by the one who loved you enough to die for you. Everything in Revelation, the judgments and the new creation, flows from the Lamb's victory on the cross.

The Lamb has seven horns and seven eyes. Remember the rule: horns mean power, and eyes mean knowledge. Seven means complete. The Lamb is all-powerful and all-knowing, and He sends God's Spirit out into all the earth.

The Lamb takes the scroll, and heaven erupts. The four creatures and the elders bow down before the Lamb. Each holds a harp, and golden bowls of incense, which John says stand for the prayers of God's people. Then they sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Your Prayers in Golden Bowls**

Notice what's in the golden bowls: the prayers of God's people. Your prayers don't disappear into the ceiling. In heaven, they're kept in golden bowls before the throne, as precious as incense. Later in Revelation, those prayers will be part of what moves God to act (8:3–5). Every prayer you've ever prayed, even the clumsy ones, even the ones that felt pointless, God has kept.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Every Tribe and Language**

The Lamb's people come from every tribe, language, people, and nation. That four-part phrase, which appears seven times in Revelation, describes the whole world. The church isn't one race, one nationality, one culture, or one language. It's the most diverse family in the world. Racism and prejudice have no place in the Lamb's family. Next time you worship, remember that you're singing alongside believers in Nigeria, Brazil, China, India, Iran, and everywhere else.

Then John hears countless angels, thousands upon thousands, tens of thousands times tens of thousands, joining the song. And then every creature in the universe joins in, everything in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" And the four living creatures say, Amen, and the elders fall down and worship.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worshiping the Lamb**

Notice who's being worshiped: the one on the throne and the Lamb, together. In chapter 4, God is worshiped as Creator. In chapter 5, the Lamb receives the same worship. In Revelation, angels refuse worship (19:10; 22:9). Only God is to be worshiped. So when all of heaven worships the Lamb, John is making clear that Jesus is God. The early Christians didn't slowly decide that Jesus was divine. They worshiped Him from the start.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worthy Is the Lamb**

The hymns of Revelation 4–5 have inspired worship for centuries. George Frideric Handel ended his famous oratorio Messiah, first performed in 1742, with a chorus called Worthy Is the Lamb, based on Revelation 5:12–13, followed by a great Amen. Many modern worship songs, like Revelation Song, draw on these chapters too. Revelation is full of worship songs because worship is the main thing heaven is doing. Revelation shows that worship

isn't something we do to fill time before the sermon. It's what we were made for, and what we'll be doing forever.

KEY VERSE

In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Revelation 5:12 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think John describes God on the throne only with colors and light, instead of describing what He looks like?
2. What does it mean that the Lion turned out to be a Lamb? How does that change the way you think about power?
3. What's a crown in your life that you could lay before God?
4. How does knowing that your prayers are kept in golden bowls change the way you think about prayer?

TRY THIS *Read Revelation 4–5 out loud, and every time you reach one of the songs, stop and sing it, say it, or pray it as your own. Then listen to the Hallelujah chorus and Worthy Is the Lamb from Handel's Messiah.*

CHAPTER 4

The Seals Are Broken

Revelation 6–7

Now the Lamb begins to break the seven seals on the scroll, one at a time. With each seal, something happens. Remember who's in control here. The Lamb opens the seals. Nothing happens on earth unless He allows it.

The first four seals release four horsemen, each one summoned by a different living creature with a thunderous Come! These are the famous four horsemen of the apocalypse, who have appeared in countless paintings, songs, and movies.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Four Horsemen**

The horsemen come from a vision in Zechariah 1:8–11 and 6:1–8, where colored horses patrol the earth. Each horse's color tells you what it brings. The first horse is white, and its rider carries a bow and wears a crown, riding out to conquer. The second horse is red like fire, and its rider is given a large sword and the power to remove peace from the world, so that people slaughter each other. The third is black, and its rider holds a pair of scales; a voice announces outrageous food prices, a whole day's pay for a small amount of wheat, which means famine. The fourth is pale, the sickly color of a corpse, and its rider is Death, with Hades following behind. They're given power over a quarter of the earth. In short, the horsemen are conquest, war, famine, and death. Sadly, these four have ridden through every century of human history.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the White Rider?**

The first rider has caused a lot of debate. Some think he's Christ, or the gospel going out to conquer, because Jesus rides a white horse in 19:11. But most interpreters think he's a picture of military conquest, like the other three. The bow was the weapon of the Parthians, a feared empire on Rome's eastern border, famous for its mounted archers. Some futurist interpreters think this rider is the Antichrist, a fake messiah who looks like Christ but brings war. Either way, the first four seals show the kinds of suffering that come when humanity rebels against God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Spare the Oil and Wine**

In the third seal, a voice says to leave the oil and wine unharmed. That's an odd detail. Grain was the poor person's food, while olive oil and wine came from trees and vines that survived droughts better. So the picture may be of a famine where the poor can't afford bread, but the rich still have their luxuries. In AD 92, the emperor Domitian ordered half the vineyards in the provinces to be cut down to grow more grain, but he backed down after protests in Asia. Some scholars think John's first readers would have thought of that.

When the fifth seal is opened, John sees the souls of people who had been killed, lying beneath the altar, for God's word and for their testimony. They cry out loudly: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is It Okay to Ask How Long?**

The martyrs' prayer echoes the Psalms. How long, Lord? appears again and again (Psalm 6:3; 13:1–2; 79:5; 89:46). It's the prayer of people who are suffering and waiting for God to act. If you've ever asked God how long, you're in good company. Notice that God doesn't scold the martyrs for asking. He gives each of them a white robe, a sign of victory and purity, and tells them to rest a little longer. He hears. He hasn't forgotten. Justice is coming. If you're waiting for God to fix something, it's okay to tell Him you're tired of waiting.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Under the Altar**

Why are the martyrs under the altar? In the temple, the blood of sacrifices was poured out at the base of the altar (Leviticus 4:7). So the picture is that the martyrs' lives were poured out like an offering to God. Paul used the same picture for his own coming death (2 Timothy 4:6). Their deaths weren't wasted. They were offerings God received.

The sixth seal brings an earthquake, and the whole universe seems to fall apart. The sun goes black, the moon turns red like blood, stars fall like figs shaken from a tree, the sky rolls up like a scroll, and every mountain and island is moved. The most powerful people on earth, kings, generals, and the rich, along with everyone else, slave or free, hide in caves and beg the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the Lamb's anger and from the face of the one on the throne. They cry that the great day of wrath has come, "and who can withstand it?"

BACKGROUND CHECK **Is the Sky Really Going to Roll Up?**

The pictures of the sixth seal come almost word for word from the Old Testament prophets, who used them to describe God's judgment on nations (Isaiah 13:10; 34:4; Joel 2:31). When Isaiah said the stars would fall at the fall of Babylon, he meant that the whole world of the people being judged would collapse, as if their universe was ending. Jesus used similar language (Mark 13:24–25). Some Christians take these pictures more literally as cosmic events at the end of history. Others see them as symbols of the collapse of powers that oppose God. Either way, the point is clear: when God judges, no one is too powerful to escape.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wrath of the Lamb**

The wrath of the Lamb is a startling phrase. Lambs aren't usually angry. But it reminds us that Jesus' love isn't soft or indifferent to evil. Because He loves, He's angry at what destroys people. And notice the irony: the people hiding

from the Lamb's wrath could find safety in the Lamb Himself. The question who can withstand it? is answered in the next chapter.

Before the seventh seal, there's a pause. This happens with the trumpets too. It's like an intermission, and it answers the question at the end of chapter 6: Who can stand? John sees four angels holding back the four winds at the earth's four corners, so that no harm comes yet. Another angel tells them to wait until God's servants have been sealed on their foreheads.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Seal**

In the ancient world, a seal was a mark of ownership and protection, like a brand or a signature. In Ezekiel 9:4, God tells an angel to put a mark on the foreheads of people who grieve over sin, so that they'll be spared. Paul says believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). The seal doesn't mean God's people won't suffer; many of them are martyrs. It means they belong to God and are kept safe spiritually. Later, the beast will put its own mark on people (13:16). Everyone in Revelation is marked by someone. The question is: whose are you?

Then John hears the number of those who are sealed: 144,000, twelve thousand from every one of Israel's twelve tribes.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are the 144,000?**

Christians have understood the 144,000 in several ways. Some, especially dispensational futurists, believe they're Jewish people who come to faith in Jesus during the tribulation. Others think they're Jewish Christians in John's time. Many interpreters, across several traditions, think they're a symbol for the whole people of God, Jew and Gentile, since 144,000 is twelve times twelve times a thousand, and since the New Testament often calls the church the true Israel (Galatians 6:16; James 1:1). The list itself is unusual. Judah is listed first, probably because Jesus came from Judah. Dan is missing, perhaps because of its history of idolatry (Judges 18). Some groups, like the Jehovah's

Witnesses, have taught that only 144,000 people will go to heaven. But most Christians point to what John sees next.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Heard and Seen**

Here's the pattern again. In chapter 5, John heard about a Lion and saw a Lamb. In chapter 7, John hears a number, 144,000 from Israel, and then he turns and sees a crowd so large that no one could count it, from every nation. Many interpreters think these are two pictures of the same group: God's people, seen first as the fulfillment of Israel, and then as a worldwide family. The number tells you that God's people are complete and none are missing. The crowd tells you how huge and diverse they are. Either way, the vision of the crowd is one of the most hopeful scenes in the Bible.

The great crowd is dressed in white, waving palm branches, and they shout out loud: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." And all the angels fall on their faces and worship God, praising Him with a sevenfold song: amen, praise, glory, wisdom, thanks, honor, power, and strength forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Palm Branches**

Palm branches were waved at victory celebrations and at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, which remembered God caring for Israel in the wilderness. The crowd waved palm branches when Jesus entered Jerusalem (John 12:13). This crowd is celebrating the victory of the Lamb. It's Palm Sunday in heaven, and this time it never ends.

One of the elders asks John who the people in white robes are, and where they came from. John answers, Sir, you know. And the elder explains that these are the people who have come through the great tribulation and out the other side, and "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."

BACKGROUND CHECK **White in Blood?**

Washing clothes in blood to make them white makes no sense, unless you understand the symbol. In the Old Testament, the blood of sacrifices made people clean before God. Jesus' blood, His life given on the cross, washes away sin. Isaiah 1:18 says that even if your sins are like scarlet, they'll be as white as snow. No amount of trying harder can make your robe white. Only the Lamb can.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Great Tribulation**

What is the great tribulation? Futurists believe it's a specific period of intense suffering just before Jesus returns, often thought to last seven years, based on Daniel 9:27. Preterists connect it with the persecution of the early church and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (Matthew 24:21). Idealists and many others see it as the suffering God's people endure in every age, since Jesus said that in this world we will have trouble (John 16:33), and John says he's a companion in tribulation already (1:9). Whatever your view, the people in white came out of it. Suffering is real, but it isn't the end of their story.

The elder goes on to describe their future. They serve God in His temple day and night. He spreads His tent over them, sheltering them with His presence. They'll never be hungry or thirsty again, and the sun's heat won't beat down on them. The Lamb, standing in the middle of the throne, will shepherd them and guide them to springs of water that give life. And God Himself will dry every tear they cry.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lamb Is a Shepherd**

Here's another surprising picture: the Lamb is the shepherd. The one who became a sacrifice now cares for the flock. Psalm 23 says the Lord is my shepherd, who leads me beside quiet waters. Isaiah 49:10 and 25:8 promise that God will lead His people to springs and wipe away their tears. Jesus called Himself the good shepherd (John 10:11). If you're hurting right now,

> this is God's promise to you: He's going to wipe your tears Himself. Not an angel, not a servant. God.

KEY VERSE

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

Revelation 7:9 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The four horsemen represent conquest, war, famine, and death. Where do you see them riding in the world today?
2. Have you ever prayed How long? What were you waiting for?
3. What do you think the two pictures of God's people, the 144,000 and the great multitude, tell us?
4. What does it mean to you that God Himself will wipe away your tears?

TRY THIS *Find out about a group of Christians somewhere in the world who are suffering for their faith. Pray for them by name this week, and if you can, write a letter of encouragement through a ministry that supports persecuted Christians.*

CHAPTER 5

Trumpets and Witnesses

Revelation 8–11

When the Lamb opens the seventh seal, something unexpected happens. Heaven goes silent, for about half an hour. After all the singing, thunder, and shouting, there's total quiet.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Silence in Heaven**
>
> Why the silence? It may be the stillness before a storm, the hush before God acts. In the Old Testament, the prophets said, Be silent before the Lord (Habakkuk 2:20; Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13). Jewish tradition also said that heaven's worship went quiet so that God could hear the prayers of His people. And that's exactly what happens next. Sometimes the most powerful moments in worship are silent. Try being still before God for a few minutes. It's harder than it sounds.

Seven angels are given seven trumpets. But before they blow them, another angel stands at the altar with a golden censer, and he's given incense to offer together with the prayers of every one of God's people. The smoke of the incense and the prayers rise up before God. Then the angel fills the censer with the altar's fire and throws it onto the earth, and there's thunder, lightning, and an earthquake.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Prayers That Shake the Earth**
>
> Look at the order of events. The prayers of God's people, including the martyrs who cried How long? in chapter 6, rise to God. And then God acts. The

trumpets that follow are, at least in part, God's answer to His people's prayers for justice. Your prayers aren't small. In Revelation, the prayers of ordinary believers go up to God's throne and come back down as fire. Never think your prayers don't matter.

Trumpets in the Bible were blown to announce a king, to call people to worship, and to warn of an attack. At Jericho, trumpets announced judgment (Joshua 6). Here, the trumpets warn the world. With the first four, disaster strikes the earth, the sea, the rivers, and the sky. Hail and fire, with blood mixed in, burn a third of the earth and trees. Something like a blazing mountain is thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea turns to blood. A star named Wormwood falls into the rivers and makes them bitter. And the sun, moon, and stars each lose a third of their light.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Plagues of Egypt**

If the trumpets sound familiar, it's because they echo the plagues of Egypt in Exodus 7–10: hail and fire, water turned to blood, darkness, and later locusts. In Exodus, the plagues showed that the gods of Egypt were powerless, and they were warnings that gave Pharaoh chances to repent before the final judgment. The trumpets work the same way. They show that God, not Rome, controls creation, and they call people to turn back to Him. And they free God's people, just as the plagues led to the exodus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why a Third?**

Notice that the trumpets affect a third of things. The seals affected a quarter (6:8). The bowls, later on, will affect everything. The judgments are getting stronger, but they're still partial. A third means a large part, but not all. That shows that the trumpets are warnings. God is giving people a chance to repent before the final judgment. His judgments are measured and limited, and they're mixed with mercy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Wormwood**

Wormwood is a real plant with a very bitter taste. In the Old Testament, it's a symbol of bitterness and sorrow (Jeremiah 9:15; Lamentations 3:19). After the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, in Ukraine, some people pointed out that one Ukrainian word for a type of wormwood is chornobyl. Many people took it as a fulfillment of Revelation 8:11. It's a striking connection, but it's a good example of how easy it is to read the news into Revelation. John's first readers would have understood Wormwood as a picture of bitter judgment, not as a code name for a city two thousand years later.

Then an eagle flies overhead, crying out three woes to the people on earth because of the three trumpets still to come.

The fifth trumpet is the strangest yet. A star that has fallen from the sky is given the key to the Abyss, a bottomless pit that was seen as a prison for demons (Luke 8:31). Out of the smoke come locusts, but they're not ordinary locusts. They look like horses ready for battle, with human faces, women's hair, lions' teeth, iron breastplates, and scorpion tails. They don't harm the grass, only people without God's seal, and they torture rather than kill, for five months. Their king is the angel of the Abyss, named Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek. Both names mean Destroyer.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Locusts with Human Faces**

Locust swarms were one of the most terrifying disasters in the ancient world. They could eat every green thing for miles, leaving people to starve. The prophet Joel described a locust plague as an invading army, with locusts like horses and the sound of chariots (Joel 2:4–5). John's locusts are demonic, a picture of spiritual torment unleashed on people who have rejected God. Some modern interpreters have tried to identify them with helicopters or modern weapons. But John's first readers would have heard echoes of Joel and Exodus. The five months may be because that's the life cycle of a locust, a

limited time. And notice that they can't touch God's people. Even the Abyss can only do what God allows.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Apollyon**

Some scholars think the name Apollyon was a jab at the god Apollo, whose symbols included the locust, and whom the emperor Domitian liked to be associated with. If so, John was saying that the god the emperors claimed as their patron was really the Destroyer. In John Bunyan's famous book The Pilgrim's Progress (1678), the hero Christian fights a terrible monster named Apollyon and defeats him with the sword of God's word.

The sixth trumpet releases four angels bound at the Euphrates River, and an enormous army of mounted troops numbering two hundred million. The horses have heads like lions and breathe fire, smoke, and sulfur, and a third of humanity is killed.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Hundred Million**

The Euphrates was the eastern border of the Roman Empire. Beyond it lay the Parthians, Rome's greatest enemy, with their feared cavalry. To John's readers, an invasion from beyond the Euphrates was a nightmare. Some modern interpreters have tried to identify the army with a specific modern nation that can field two hundred million soldiers. But the number, literally two myriads of myriads, seems to mean an uncountable army, like the angels in 5:11. The horses are not ordinary horses, either. They're demonic, a picture of the horrors of war.

BACKGROUND CHECK **They Still Did Not Repent**

The saddest verses in this section come at the end of chapter 9. Despite all these warnings, the rest of humanity still didn't repent. They kept on worshiping demons, and idols made of gold and silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which can't see, hear, or walk. And they didn't turn from murder, magic arts, sexual immorality, or theft. That shows the purpose of the trumpets: repentance. But it also shows how hard the human heart can become. Disaster by itself doesn't change people. Only God's grace does. The good

news is that in chapter 11, after the witnesses' testimony, people finally do give glory to God (11:13).

Before the seventh trumpet, there's another intermission. A mighty angel comes down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, a rainbow above him, his face shining like the sun, and legs like columns of fire. He has a little scroll open in his hand. He plants one foot on the sea and the other on the land, and shouts like a roaring lion. Seven thunders speak, but John is told to seal up what they said and not to write it down.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Some Things We're Not Told**

John is told not to write down what the seven thunders said. That's a helpful reminder. Even in a book called Revelation, God doesn't reveal everything. There are some things He has decided to keep to Himself (Deuteronomy 29:29). Anyone who claims to have the whole future figured out is claiming more than John did.

The angel swears by the Creator that the waiting is over. Then John is told to take the little scroll and eat it. It tastes sweet as honey in his mouth, but it turns his stomach sour. Then he's told he must prophesy again to many nations, peoples, kings, and languages.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sweet and Sour**

Ezekiel also ate a scroll that tasted sweet as honey (Ezekiel 3:1–3). Eating the scroll means taking God's word inside you so completely that it becomes part of you. It's sweet because God's word is good, and it's a joy to receive. But it turns sour because the message includes judgment and suffering, and proclaiming it is hard. Following Jesus is like that. Knowing God is sweet. But sharing His message in a world that resists it can be painful.

John is given a measuring rod and told to measure God's temple and the altar, and count the worshipers, but to leave out the outer court, which is given to the nations, who will trample the holy city for

forty-two months. Measuring something in the Bible means protecting it (Zechariah 2:1–5). God's people are protected spiritually, even while they suffer outwardly.

Then God appoints two witnesses, who prophesy for 1,260 days, dressed in sackcloth, a rough cloth worn in mourning and repentance. They're described as two olive trees and two lampstands (an echo of Zechariah 4). They have power to breathe fire on their enemies, to stop the rain, to turn water to blood, and to send plagues on the earth. When they finish their testimony, the beast from the Abyss kills them, and their bodies lie in the street of the great city, where their Lord was crucified. People celebrate their deaths and send each other gifts. But after three and a half days, God breathes life into them, they stand up, and a cloud carries them up to heaven as their enemies watch.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Are the Two Witnesses?**

Christians have suggested several identities for the two witnesses. Many think of Moses and Elijah, since stopping rain was Elijah's miracle (1 Kings 17:1) and turning water to blood was Moses' (Exodus 7:20), and the two appeared with Jesus at the Transfiguration. Some early Christians suggested Enoch and Elijah, the two people who never died. Futurists often think they're two prophets who will appear during the tribulation. Many others think they're a symbol of the whole church in its witnessing role, since they're called two lampstands, and lampstands represent churches (1:20). Two witnesses were required to establish testimony in court (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jesus sent out His disciples two by two (Luke 10:1).

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Pattern of the Witnesses**

Whoever they are, the witnesses follow the same pattern as Jesus. They testify faithfully. They're killed in the city where their Lord was crucified. Their enemies celebrate. Then they're raised to life and carried by a cloud into heaven. That's the pattern for every faithful Christian. Following Jesus may

lead to suffering, but it ends in resurrection. The forty-two months, 1,260 days, and three and a half days are all versions of three and a half, the broken number. Their time of suffering is limited. Their victory is permanent.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Sodom, Egypt, and Jerusalem**

John says the great city where the witnesses' bodies lie is symbolically named Sodom and Egypt, and it's the place where their Lord was crucified, which sounds like Jerusalem. But later, the great city is Babylon, which seems to be Rome. Many interpreters think the great city is a symbol of every human society that sets itself against God: as wicked as Sodom, as oppressive as Egypt, as blind as the Jerusalem that crucified Jesus, and as proud as Rome.

Finally, the seventh angel blows his trumpet, and loud voices in heaven announce the most important news in the book. The world's kingdom now belongs to our Lord and His Messiah, and His reign will never end. The twenty-four elders fall on their faces and worship, thanking God for taking His great power and beginning to reign. Then God's temple in heaven opens, and the ark of His covenant is seen inside.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Hallelujah Chorus**

If 11:15 sounds familiar, you may have heard it in Handel's Hallelujah chorus from Messiah, which uses the old King James wording of this verse, along with 19:6 and 19:16. Ever since King George II supposedly stood up during it in London, audiences have traditionally stood for the chorus. The verse sums up the whole Bible's story. The kingdom of the world, all its empires, presidents, kings, and powers, will become the kingdom of Jesus. The seventh trumpet doesn't bring more disaster. It brings the King.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lost Ark**

The ark of the covenant was the gold-covered chest that held the stone tablets of the law, kept in the Most Holy Place of the temple. It disappeared, probably when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. People have been searching for it ever since, and it was the subject of the movie Raiders of

the Lost Ark. In Revelation, John sees the ark in heaven. The point isn't where the box is. It's that God's covenant with His people is safe, and His presence is open to them.

KEY VERSE

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever."

Revelation 11:15 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What does the silence in heaven teach you about prayer and worship?
2. Why do you think people in Revelation 9 still didn't repent after all the warnings? What softens a hard heart?
3. What would it look like for you to be a faithful witness, like the two witnesses?
4. How does the seventh trumpet change the way you think about the news or the future?

TRY THIS *Spend five minutes in complete silence before God this week. No phone, no music, no words. Just sit, and remember that He's on the throne. Then write down anything that came to mind.*

CHAPTER 6

The Woman, the Dragon, and the Beasts

Revelation 12–14

Chapter 12 starts a new section, and it may be the key to the whole book. It's like the curtain is pulled back even further, and John shows us the spiritual war behind everything else in Revelation.

A great sign appears in heaven: a woman dressed in the sun, standing on the moon, wearing a crown made of twelve stars. She's in labor. Then a second sign appears: a huge red dragon, with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns. With its tail it drags down a third of the stars. The dragon waits in front of the woman, ready to devour her baby the moment it's born. She gives birth to a son, who is destined to rule the nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:9), and her child is snatched up to God and His throne. The woman escapes into the wilderness, where God takes care of her for 1,260 days.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is the Woman?**
>
> The child is clearly Jesus, the Messiah who will rule the nations. But who is the woman? Christians have given three main answers, and they're not mutually exclusive. Many see her as Israel, the people of God who gave birth to the Messiah. The sun, moon, and twelve stars recall Joseph's dream about his family, the twelve tribes (Genesis 37:9). Others see her as the church, God's people through the ages, persecuted by the dragon and protected in

the wilderness. And in Catholic and Orthodox tradition, she's often understood as also representing Mary, the mother of Jesus, and she's frequently pictured in art standing on the moon, crowned with stars. Many interpreters think the woman is mainly the faithful people of God, from Israel to the church, from whom the Messiah came.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Story Behind the Story**

Many people in John's world knew a myth that sounds similar. In one Greek version, the dragon Python tried to kill the goddess Leto before she gave birth to Apollo, who later killed the dragon. Roman emperors liked to compare themselves to Apollo, the hero who defeated chaos. John tells the true story. The real hero isn't the emperor. It's Jesus. And the real dragon isn't some chaos monster. It's Satan, who works through emperors.

Notice what John skips. He goes straight from Jesus' birth to His being snatched up to God's throne. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are summed up in one sentence. The point is that the dragon failed. It wanted to destroy Jesus, and it couldn't.

Then war breaks out in heaven. Michael, leading his angels, fights against the dragon and his angels, and the dragon loses. It's thrown down to the earth. Now John tells us exactly who the dragon is: "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Ancient Serpent**

John's description links the dragon with the serpent in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Satan is called the devil, which means slanderer, and Satan, which means accuser. He's the deceiver of the whole world. And he's the one who accuses God's people day and night before God. But now he's been thrown down. When did this happen? Many interpreters connect it with Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus said He saw Satan fall like lightning (Luke 10:18), and that the prince of this world would be driven out when He was

lifted up on the cross (John 12:31–32). Others think it describes Satan's original rebellion, or a future event. Whatever the timing, the point is clear. Satan has lost his place. He's a defeated enemy.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Accuser Is Silenced**

A loud voice in heaven celebrates that the accuser of God's people, who accused them in God's presence night and day, has been thrown down. Do you ever hear a voice in your head that says you're worthless, too far gone, a failure, unforgivable? That's the voice of the accuser. But the accuser has been thrown out of the courtroom. Jesus is your advocate (1 John 2:1). When you've confessed your sin, no accusation against you can stand (Romans 8:33–34).

How did God's people overcome the accuser? Not by their own strength. They overcame him in two ways: by the Lamb's blood, and by their own testimony. And they didn't love their lives so much that they were afraid to die.

BACKGROUND CHECK **How to Win Against Satan**

Here's the secret of victory in Revelation, and it's not what you might expect. It's not about being strong, famous, or powerful. It's the Lamb's blood, what Jesus did for you on the cross, which removes the accuser's power. It's the word of your testimony, your faithfulness in telling the truth about Jesus. And it's loving Jesus more than your own life. That's how the martyrs won. They looked like they lost, but they actually won, just like the Lamb.

Heaven rejoices, but there's a warning for the earth: the devil has come down in a rage, because he knows his time is short. That's important. The devil isn't raging because he's winning. He's raging because he's losing and knows it.

The dragon chases the woman, but she's given wings like a great eagle's, to fly to safety in the wilderness, where she's cared for through the three and a half times. The dragon spews a river of

water after her, but the earth swallows it. So the dragon goes off to make war on the rest of her children, those who obey God and cling to their testimony about Jesus.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Eagle's Wings**
>
> The eagle's wings recall God's words to Israel after the exodus: He carried them on eagles' wings (Exodus 19:4). The wilderness was where God provided for Israel, with manna and water from the rock. So the woman in the wilderness is God's people, protected and provided for, even in a hostile world. Isaiah promised that those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles (Isaiah 40:31). You might be in a wilderness season right now. God provides there too.

Then the dragon stands on the shore, and John sees a beast rise out of the sea. It has seven heads and ten horns, a crown on every horn, and a blasphemous name on every head. It looks like a leopard, with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's. The dragon hands the beast his power, his throne, and huge authority. One of its heads looks as if it had received a deadly wound that has now healed, and the whole world follows the beast in amazement. People worship the dragon and the beast, saying no one is like the beast and no one can fight against it.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Daniel's Beasts**
>
> In Daniel 7, four beasts rise out of the sea: a lion, a bear, a leopard, and a terrifying beast with ten horns. They represent four empires. John's beast combines all four into one monster. It's the ultimate empire, every proud, violent, godless power rolled into one. To John's readers, the beast was clearly Rome, with its emperors who demanded worship and persecuted God's people. Notice that it rises from the sea: from the west, across the sea from Asia, where Rome's ships came from. But the beast is also a picture of every power that sets itself up as God, in every age.

BACKGROUND CHECK **A Fake Resurrection**

The beast's head with a fatal wound that is healed is a dark parody of the Lamb, who was slain and lives. Satan is not creative. He copies. The dragon, the sea beast, and the false prophet form a counterfeit trinity. The beast has a fake resurrection, receives fake worship, and claims fake authority. Many scholars think John's readers would have thought of a famous legend about Nero. After Nero killed himself in AD 68, rumors spread that he hadn't really died, or that he would come back from the dead, leading an army from the east. Several impostors claimed to be Nero returned. John may be using this legend as a picture of an evil power that seems to have been defeated, then comes back stronger.

The beast is allowed to speak arrogant, blasphemous words, and to rule for forty-two months. It makes war on God's people and conquers them. It's given authority over the whole world. Everyone whose name is missing from the Lamb's book of life worships the beast. Then John adds a call for endurance and faithfulness: if anyone is going into captivity, that's where they'll go, and if anyone is killed with the sword, that's how they'll die.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Conquered but Victorious**

It's painful to read that the beast makes war on God's people and conquers them. But remember chapter 12: they overcame by the Lamb's blood and their testimony, and didn't love their lives so much that they feared death. In Revelation, being killed for Jesus isn't losing. It's winning, the same way the Lamb won. The beast's victory is only for forty-two months, the broken number. The Lamb's victory is forever.

Then John sees a second beast, rising out of the earth. It has two lamb-like horns, yet it talks like a dragon. Later, it's called the false prophet (16:13). It makes everyone worship the first beast, performs great signs, even calling down fire from heaven, and deceives people. It sets up an image of the first beast, gives it breath so that it

can speak, and has everyone who won't worship it killed. And it forces everyone, small and great, rich and poor, slave and free, to take a mark on the right hand or forehead, so that no one can buy or sell without it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Lamb-Like Beast**

The second beast looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon. It's religion in the service of evil. In John's world, it probably stood for the priests of the emperor cult and the local leaders in the cities of Asia who promoted emperor worship. They organized festivals, built temples and statues, and made worship of the emperor part of everyday life. Some ancient temples even had statues that seemed to speak or move, using hidden tricks. In every age, there's a temptation to make religion serve power, to use God's name to support a nation, a party, a leader, or a cause. Watch out for any voice that looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mark of the Beast**

What is the mark of the beast? In John's world, it would have reminded readers of many things: the brands or tattoos sometimes put on slaves, soldiers, or devotees of a god, and coins stamped with the emperor's image and titles, which you had to use to buy and sell. Economic pressure was real. If you didn't join the trade guild feasts and honor the emperor, you could lose your business. The mark is a parody of God's seal on His servants' foreheads (7:3; 14:1). It recalls Deuteronomy 6:8, where God told Israel to bind His words on their hands and foreheads, meaning that His law should shape what they think and what they do. So the mark of the beast is about allegiance: whose thinking and actions you belong to. Everyone is marked by someone.

Then comes the most famous number in the Bible. John says this calls for wisdom: "Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666."

BACKGROUND CHECK **666 and Nero**

In the ancient world, letters were also used as numbers. In Greek and Hebrew, there were no separate number symbols, so each letter had a numerical value. Adding up the letters of a name was called gematria, and it was a popular puzzle. Graffiti found in Pompeii says, I love her whose number is 545. Many scholars think 666 is the value of the name Nero Caesar, written in Hebrew letters: nun (50), resh (200), vav (6), nun (50), qof (100), samekh (60), resh (200), which adds up to 666. Nero was the first emperor to persecute Christians, and he became a symbol of the evil emperor. The NIV footnote also suggests the number could be translated as humanity's number.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Mystery of 616**

Here's a fascinating clue. Some early manuscripts of Revelation say the number is 616, not 666. The church father Irenaeus, writing around AD 180, knew about this variant and thought it was a copying mistake. In 2005, scholars announced that a fragment of Revelation from around the third century, found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, reads 616. Why would anyone change the number? If you spell Nero Caesar in Hebrew from the Latin form of the name, Nero, instead of the Greek form, Neron, you drop the final nun (50), and the total becomes 616. That's a strong reason many scholars think the number pointed to Nero. Not everyone agrees. Some think the beast is a future Antichrist whose identity will become clear, and others see 666 as a symbol: six is one less than seven, the perfect number, so 666 is a triple failure to reach perfection, humanity trying to be God and always falling short. Here's a fun fact: the Greek letters of the name Jesus add up to 888.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Fear the Mark, and Don't Set Dates**

Over the centuries, people have claimed that the mark of the beast was the Roman Catholic Church, Napoleon, Hitler, credit cards, social security numbers, barcodes, computer chips, and vaccines. They have all been wrong. People have also tried to set dates for Jesus' return. In the 1840s, William Miller taught that Jesus would return in 1843 or 1844, and when He didn't, his followers called it the Great Disappointment. A popular booklet in 1988 gave 88 reasons why the rapture would happen that year. In 2011, a radio host

named Harold Camping predicted the end of the world for May 21. Jesus said no one knows the day or hour, not even the angels (Matthew 24:36). So be wary of anyone who claims to know. And please don't be afraid that you could accidentally take the mark. In Revelation, the mark goes with worshiping the beast. It's a matter of who you worship and give your loyalty to, not a chip someone could slip into your arm. If you belong to Jesus, you're sealed by God, and no one can take that away.

After the darkness of chapter 13, chapter 14 shows the other side. John sees the Lamb on Mount Zion, with the 144,000, whose foreheads bear His name and His Father's. They sing a new song in front of the throne, and they go wherever the Lamb leads. They're described as pure, like soldiers set apart for a holy war, the firstfruits of the harvest of God's people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Following the Lamb**

The beast's followers have his mark. The Lamb's followers have His name. The beast's followers are deceived. The Lamb's followers are truthful; no lie is found in their mouths. Everything in Revelation forces a choice between two kingdoms, two marks, two cities, and two destinies. But notice how the Lamb's followers are described: they follow Him wherever He leads. That's the simplest definition of a Christian. It doesn't mean you'll never fail. It means you keep following.

Then three angels fly through the sky with messages. The first proclaims the eternal gospel to the whole world, calling them to fear God, give Him glory, and worship the Creator. The second announces that Babylon the Great has fallen. The third warns that anyone who worships the beast and receives its mark will have to drink the wine of God's anger.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Gospel in the Middle of Judgment**

Notice that, in the middle of all the judgments, an angel proclaims the gospel to the whole world. Even at this late stage, God is calling people to turn to

Him. That's what God is like. His judgment is real, but His invitation is always open. If you've been thinking it's too late for you, it isn't.

Then John hears a voice from heaven say: "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." And the Spirit says yes, they'll rest from their hard work, and the good they've done will follow them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Rest**

This blessing has been read at many Christian funerals. To believers who were facing death for their faith, it was a promise that dying in the Lord isn't the end. It's rest. If you've lost someone who loved Jesus, this verse is for you. They're resting, and nothing they did for Him is forgotten.

The chapter ends with two harvest pictures. A figure like a son of man, seated on a white cloud, swings a sickle and harvests the earth, which many see as the gathering of God's people. Then an angel gathers grapes and throws them into the winepress of God's wrath, and blood flows out for 1,600 stadia, about 180 miles. That's a picture of judgment. Like many of the numbers in Revelation, 1,600 is probably symbolic: four times four times a hundred, judgment covering the whole earth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Harder Passages**

Some passages in Revelation, like the winepress of God's wrath and the smoke of torment in 14:10–11, are hard to read. Christians have different views about the nature of final judgment and hell. Most Christians through history have believed in eternal, conscious punishment for those who reject God. Some believe that the wicked will ultimately be destroyed rather than suffer forever. All agree that God's judgment is real, serious, and perfectly just, and that God doesn't want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). If these passages trouble you, that's okay. Talk about them with a pastor or youth leader. Remember that the one who judges is the Lamb who died for sinners, and that the invitation to come to Him is still open.

KEY VERSE

They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

Revelation 12:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think Revelation pictures the devil as raging because his time is short? How does that change the way you think about evil?
2. What are some voices today that look like a lamb but speak like a dragon?
3. What has the word mark meant to you before? How does understanding it as allegiance change things?
4. What would it look like for you to follow the Lamb wherever He leads?

TRY THIS *The next time you hear the accuser's voice in your head, telling you you're worthless or unforgivable, answer it out loud with Revelation 12:11 or Romans 8:1. Write one of those verses on a card and keep it with you this week.*

CHAPTER 7

Bowls and Babylon

Revelation 15–18

John sees another great sign in heaven: seven angels holding the last seven plagues. They're called last because with them God's anger against evil is finished. Before the plagues begin, though, John sees something beautiful.

Standing beside a sea of glass mixed with fire are the people who have overcome the beast, its image, and the number of its name. God has given them harps, and they're singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Song of Moses and the Lamb**
>
> After God brought Israel through the Red Sea, Moses and the Israelites sang a song of victory on the shore (Exodus 15). Now God's people stand beside another sea, singing about a greater rescue. Notice what's missing. The song doesn't celebrate the people's own courage. It's all about God: His deeds, His ways, His name, His holiness. And look at the hope at the end: every nation will come to worship. Even in a section about judgment, the song looks forward to the whole world turning to God. That's the heart of Revelation: God's judgment clears the way for the nations to be healed.

Then the temple in heaven opens, and the seven angels come out, dressed in shining linen with golden sashes, like priests. One of the living creatures gives them seven golden bowls, full of God's wrath. The temple fills with smoke from God's glory, and no one can enter until the plagues are complete.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Bowls**
>
> The golden bowls appeared earlier, filled with incense: the prayers of God's people (5:8). Now golden bowls are filled with God's wrath. Many interpreters see a connection. The bowls of judgment are God's answer to the bowls of prayer. The martyrs asked how long (6:10). Now God is answering.

A voice thunders from the temple, telling the seven angels to go and pour out the bowls on the earth. One after another, they pour them out. Painful sores break out on the people who have the beast's mark. The sea turns to blood like a dead body's, and every creature in it dies. The rivers and springs turn to blood. The sun scorches people with fire. The beast's throne is plunged into darkness, and people gnaw their tongues in pain. The Euphrates River dries up, opening the way for the kings of the east. And when the seventh bowl is poured into the air, a voice from the throne cries out, "It is done!" Then comes the greatest earthquake in human history, the great city splits into three parts, and huge hailstones, about a hundred pounds each, fall from the sky.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Seals, Trumpets, Bowls**
>
> The seals affected a fourth, the trumpets a third, and now the bowls affect everything. Some interpreters see the three sets of seven as happening one after another, in order. Others think they cover the same period of time from different angles, each one more intense, like a spiral staircase that keeps returning to the same point but rises higher each time. One reason is that each set seems to end at the very end of history, with earthquakes, thunder, and the arrival of God's kingdom (6:12–17; 11:15–19; 16:17–21). Whichever

view you take, the bowls show that God's patience has a limit. One day, evil will be completely finished.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Just and True**

In the middle of the bowls, an angel praises God for being just in His judgments, because the people who shed the blood of God's people and prophets are being given blood to drink. And the altar answers, agreeing that God's judgments are true and just. That might sound harsh. But think about how the first readers would have heard it. They had seen friends killed. They had been treated as if they didn't matter. Revelation tells them that God saw everything, and that He would make it right. Judgment is good news for victims. And notice the tragedy: even under these plagues, people curse God and refuse to repent (16:9, 11). The problem isn't that God won't forgive. It's that people won't turn.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Armageddon**

The sixth bowl brings three evil spirits that look like frogs, coming from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the beast's false prophet. They gather the world's kings for battle on God Almighty's great day, at a place called Armageddon in Hebrew. Armageddon probably means mountain of Megiddo. Megiddo was a city overlooking a large plain in northern Israel where many famous battles were fought (Judges 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29). It had been fought over so often that it became a symbol of decisive battle. Strangely, there's no actual mountain there, only a hill. Futurists often see Armageddon as a literal final battle in Israel. Others see it as a symbol of the final showdown between God and the powers of evil. Either way, notice what happens when the battle finally comes in chapter 19: there's no long war. Jesus wins with a word.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Stay Awake**

Right in the middle of the bowls, Jesus speaks: "Look, I come like a thief!" And He blesses the person who stays awake and keeps their clothes on, so they won't be embarrassed and exposed. Jesus used the same picture in the Gospels (Matthew 24:43–44), and He'd said the same thing to Sardis (3:3). The point isn't to make you jumpy. It's to keep you ready. A Christian who's ready

for Jesus' return doesn't need to know the date. They just live faithfully every day.

Now one of the seven angels takes John into the wilderness to show him the judgment of the great prostitute. She's riding a scarlet beast that has seven heads and ten horns, covered with blasphemous names. She's dressed in purple and scarlet, sparkling with gold, jewels, and pearls, and she holds a golden cup full of the filth of her immorality. On her forehead is a name: Babylon the Great, mother of all prostitutes. And she's drunk on the blood of God's people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Is Babylon?**

The original Babylon was the empire that destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BC and took the Jews into exile. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple again in AD 70, Jewish and Christian writers began using Babylon as a code name for Rome. Peter did the same (1 Peter 5:13). John gives a big clue: the angel says, "The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits." Rome was famous as the city built on seven hills. It was celebrated on coins as the goddess Roma, seated on its seven hills. And the angel says the woman is the great city ruling over the earth's kings (17:18). In John's time, that could only be Rome. Some futurists think Babylon will be a literal city rebuilt at the end of history, and others see it as a symbol of a worldwide system of power and wealth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Babylon in Every Age**

Babylon is more than one city. It's a picture of what happens whenever a society, a nation, or a system becomes proud, rich, and powerful at the expense of others, especially the weak, and demands the loyalty that belongs only to God. Babylon is seductive. It looks glamorous, like a woman dressed in purple and gold. It offers wealth, pleasure, comfort, and belonging. But underneath, it's drunk on blood. Every age has its Babylon. Part of following Jesus is learning to recognize it, and refusing to let it own your heart.

The angel explains that the seven heads also stand for seven kings. Five are gone, one is reigning, and one is still to come for a short time. The beast itself is an eighth king, who belongs to the seven. Many interpreters have tried to count Roman emperors to match this, but scholars disagree about where to start counting and whether to include certain short-reigning emperors. Seven may simply mean the complete line of godless rulers. The ten horns are ten kings who will rule with the beast for one hour, a very short time, and make war against the Lamb. But they won't win.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Lamb Wins**
>
> Here's the turning point of chapter 17. The kings attack the Lamb, and the Lamb beats them, since He is the Lord over every lord and the King over every king. Alongside Him stand His people: called, chosen, and faithful. That's all you need to know about the future. Not who the ten kings are, or when they'll rule. Just this: the Lamb wins, and His people are with Him.

Then there's a surprising twist. The ten horns and the beast turn on the prostitute and destroy her. Evil eats itself. The empires and systems that seem so united against God eventually tear each other apart. And God is in control even of that.

In chapter 18, an angel with great authority comes down from heaven, lighting up the earth with his splendor, and shouts that Babylon the Great has fallen. It has become a home for demons and unclean spirits. Then another voice calls out to God's people: "Come out of her, my people," so that you don't share in her sins or her plagues.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Come Out of Her**
>
> God's people are told to come out of Babylon. That doesn't necessarily mean moving to a different city. The first readers were living in the cities of Asia, surrounded by Rome's power and wealth. It meant refusing to share in

Babylon's values: its pride, its greed, its idolatry, and its cruelty. Jeremiah gave a similar call to the Jews in the original Babylon (Jeremiah 51:45). For you, it might mean refusing to let your worth be measured by money, possessions, followers, or status. It might mean saying no to things everybody else is doing. You can live in the middle of Babylon without letting Babylon live in you.

Babylon boasts in her heart that she sits as a queen and will never be a widow or see grief. But her plagues come in a single day: death, mourning, and famine. Then three groups stand at a distance and mourn her fall: the kings who shared her luxury, the merchants who got rich from her, and the sea captains and sailors who made their living carrying her cargo.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Cargo List**

The merchants' cargo list is one of the most fascinating passages in Revelation. It reads like an inventory of the Roman economy: gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, scarlet cloth, rare citron wood, ivory, bronze, iron, marble, cinnamon, spices, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle, sheep, horses, and carriages. These were the luxuries that flowed into Rome from all over the world. And then the list ends with the most shocking item: "and human beings sold as slaves." The Greek literally says bodies and souls of humans. Millions of slaves powered the Roman economy. By putting human beings at the end of a list of products, John shows how Babylon treated people: as merchandise. God sees it, and judges it.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Do You Value?**

The kings and merchants mourn Babylon, not because they loved her, but because they lost money. Notice the repeated cry: in one hour, all this wealth has been ruined. It's a warning about what happens when life is built on stuff. Think about the things you buy. Where do they come from? Who made them, and were they treated fairly? Many Christians today are concerned about

> human trafficking and forced labor, which still exist. Caring about justice in the way we spend money is one way of coming out of Babylon.

Finally, a mighty angel lifts a boulder as big as a huge millstone and throws it into the sea, saying that Babylon will be thrown down like that and never found again. No more music, no more craftsmen, no more millstones grinding, no more lamps, no more weddings. Heaven is told to rejoice, because God has judged her for the blood of His people.

KEY VERSE

They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.

Revelation 17:14 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. The song of Moses and the Lamb is all about God, not about the singers. What would it look like for your worship to be more about God?
2. Where do you see Babylon today? What does it offer, and what does it cost?
3. What would it mean for you to come out of Babylon without leaving your city or school?
4. Why do you think John ended the cargo list with human beings?

TRY THIS *Look at the labels on five things you own, like clothes, shoes, or electronics. Find out where they were made. Then look up one organization that works against human trafficking or forced labor, and pray for its work this week.*

CHAPTER 8

The Rider on the White Horse

Revelation 19–20

After Babylon falls, John hears what sounds like a huge crowd in heaven shouting Hallelujah. Chapter 19 is the only place in the New Testament where the word Hallelujah appears, four times. It's a Hebrew word that means praise the Lord. The crowd praises God for His true and just judgments. Then the elders and living creatures fall down and worship, and a voice from the throne calls all God's servants, small and great, to praise Him.

Then John hears the loudest sound yet, like a huge crowd, like a roaring waterfall, like booming thunder: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!" It's time for the Lamb's wedding, and His bride is ready.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Wedding of the Lamb**

The Bible often describes God's relationship with His people as a marriage (Isaiah 54:5; Hosea 2:19–20). Jesus called Himself the bridegroom (Mark 2:19–20). Paul said that Christ loves the church as a husband loves his wife (Ephesians 5:25–27). Now, at the end of history, the wedding finally arrives. The bride is the church, all God's people. She's given fine linen, bright and clean, which represents the righteous things God's people have done. Notice the contrast: the prostitute, Babylon, wore purple and scarlet and was drunk on blood. The bride is dressed in clean white linen. Revelation offers two women, two cities, and two ways to live. The angel says: "Blessed are those

who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" That invitation is for you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Worship God**

John is so overwhelmed that he falls at the angel's feet to worship him. But the angel stops him. He says he's only a fellow servant, and tells John to worship God. John does the same thing again in 22:8–9. If even the great apostle John could be tempted to worship the wrong thing, we can too. It's easy to worship a gift instead of the giver: a famous preacher, a worship leader, an experience, a feeling. Revelation says: worship God alone.

Then John sees heaven standing open, and a white horse. Its rider's name is Faithful and True, and He judges and makes war with justice. His eyes are like fire, and He wears many crowns. A name is written on Him that only He Himself knows. "He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God." The armies of heaven follow Him on white horses, dressed in clean white linen. A sharp sword comes out of His mouth to strike down the nations. And on His robe and thigh is written His name: "king of kings and lord of lords."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Whose Blood?**

The rider's robe is dipped in blood before the battle even begins. Whose blood is it? Some think it's the blood of His enemies, echoing Isaiah 63:1–3, where God's garments are stained red from treading the winepress of judgment. But many interpreters think it's His own blood, the blood of the Lamb who was slain. Remember, in Revelation, the Lamb conquers by dying. The rider is the same Jesus who went to the cross. He doesn't change from a gentle lamb into a violent warrior. He's always the Lamb.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Word of God**

The rider is called the Word of God, the same title John's Gospel gives Jesus (John 1:1, 14). And His only weapon is a sword coming out of His mouth. That's His word. The army behind Him isn't dressed for battle; they're wearing

white linen, not armor. And they don't do anything. When the battle comes, it's over instantly. The beast is captured, along with the false prophet, and thrown alive into the lake of fire, and the rest are killed by the sword from the rider's mouth. There's no long war, no suspense. Jesus speaks, and evil is finished. That's how powerful His word is. The same word that created the world (Genesis 1:3) will put it right.

BACKGROUND CHECK **King of Kings**

In John's world, the Roman emperor claimed grand titles like king of kings. Earlier kings of Babylon and Persia had used them too (Daniel 2:37; Ezra 7:12). Revelation says those titles belong only to Jesus. Today, nations, leaders, companies, celebrities, and influencers may claim huge power and loyalty. But there's only one King of kings. Every other power will one day bow to Him (Philippians 2:10–11).

In chapter 20, an angel comes down from heaven holding a great chain and the Abyss's key. He seizes the dragon, the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan, and chains him up for a thousand years, then throws him into the Abyss and seals it, so he can't deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are over. After that, Satan must be released for a short time.

Then John sees thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge. He sees the souls of people who had been beheaded for their testimony about Jesus, who had refused to worship the beast or receive its mark. "They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years." John calls this the first resurrection, and he says that those who share in it are blessed and holy, and the second death can't touch them.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Views of the Millennium**

The thousand years is called the millennium, from the Latin for a thousand years. It's mentioned only here in the whole Bible, six times in seven verses. Christians have held three main views about it.

Premillennialism says Jesus will return before (pre) the millennium, and then reign on earth for a thousand years, with Satan bound, before the final judgment. Many early Christians, such as Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus, held a version of this view. Today there are two main forms. Historic premillennialism sees the church going through the tribulation before Jesus returns. Dispensational premillennialism, which developed in the 1800s, usually includes a pre-tribulation rapture and a special role for national Israel in the millennium.

Postmillennialism says Jesus will return after (post) the millennium, a long golden age when the gospel spreads and transforms the world, bringing great peace and justice. This view was popular among many Protestants in the 1700s and 1800s, including leaders of great revivals and missionary movements.

Amillennialism says there is no literal (a means no) thousand-year reign on earth. The thousand years is a symbol for the whole period between Jesus' first coming and His return. Satan was bound at the cross, so that he can't stop the gospel from spreading to the nations (Matthew 12:29), and believers who have died reign with Christ in heaven now. This view was taught by Augustine around AD 400, and it's held by many Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, and Reformed Christians.

Faithful Christians who love the Bible hold each of these views. All of them agree on the most important thing: Jesus will return, defeat evil, and reign forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Everyone Agrees On**

It's easy to get lost in arguments about the millennium. But don't miss what the passage says clearly. Satan's power is limited. He can only do what God allows, and his time is short. The faithful, even those who were killed, are not losers; they reign with Christ. And the second death can't touch those who belong to Him. Whatever your view of the thousand years, those are promises you can stand on.

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released and deceives the nations again, called Gog and Magog, an echo of Ezekiel 38–39. They

gather for battle, as many as the sand on the seashore, and surround God's people and His beloved city. But fire falls from heaven and consumes them. And the devil is thrown into the fiery lake to join the beast and false prophet, forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Release Satan?**

Why would God release Satan at all? It's one of the puzzles of Revelation. Some think it shows that even after a long reign of peace, the human heart still needs to be changed by God's grace, not just by a better environment. Others think it shows that evil gets one last chance to show what it really is before it's destroyed forever. Either way, notice how short the final battle is. Again, there's no war. Fire falls, and it's over. Satan's final defeat takes one verse.

Then John sees a great white throne and the one seated on it. Earth and sky flee from His presence. He sees all the dead, the great and the small, in front of the throne. Books are opened, and so is the book of life. Each person is judged by their deeds, written in the books. The sea gives up its dead, and so do death and Hades. Then death and Hades themselves are hurled into the fiery lake, which is the second death. And anyone whose name is missing from the book of life goes there too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Two Kinds of Books**

Notice that there are two kinds of books. There are books that record what people have done, and there's the book of life, which records the names of those who belong to the Lamb (13:8; 21:27). If we were judged only by the books of deeds, none of us would pass. That's why the book of life matters. Your name is written there not because you're good enough, but because the Lamb was slain for you. That doesn't mean what we do doesn't matter. It matters a lot. But our hope rests on the Lamb's book.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Death Is Thrown Away**

Don't miss one of the best lines in Revelation: death and Hades end up in the fiery lake. Death itself, the enemy that has haunted every human being since Adam, is destroyed. Paul said the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). Jesus holds the keys to death and Hades (1:18), and now He gets rid of them for good. If you've lost someone you love, this is the promise that the story doesn't end with a funeral.

KEY VERSE

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war.

Revelation 19:11 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the only weapon the rider uses is the sword from His mouth? What does that say about the power of God's word?
2. Which of the three views of the millennium makes the most sense to you? What would you ask someone who holds a different view?
3. What things are easy to worship instead of God?
4. How does knowing that death itself will be destroyed change the way you think about death?

TRY THIS *Ask a pastor or youth leader which view of the millennium your church holds, and why. Then ask what they think all Christians can agree on about Jesus' return. Write down what you learn.*

CHAPTER 9

Everything New

Revelation 21–22

And now we come to the end of the Bible, and the most beautiful vision of all. John sees a new heaven and new earth, because the first heaven and earth have passed away, and there is no longer any sea. Then he sees the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, descending from God out of heaven, made ready like a bride dressed beautifully for her husband.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Renewed or Replaced?**

Will God destroy the universe and start from scratch, or renew the one we have? Christians have held both views. Some point to the words passed away and believe God will replace this creation with a completely new one. Others notice that the word for new here usually means new in quality, not brand-new in time, and that Paul says creation itself will be set free from decay (Romans 8:21). They think God will renew and transform this world, the way Jesus' resurrection body was the same body, but glorified. I discussed this in more detail in the book on 2 Peter, in the box on how 2 Peter 3:10 describes the earth being laid bare. Either way, the future isn't floating on clouds playing harps forever. It's a real, physical new creation, with God living among His people.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No More Sea**

Why no more sea? It's not because God doesn't like beaches. In the ancient world, the sea was a symbol of chaos, danger, and evil. The beast came out of the sea (13:1). For John on Patmos, the sea was also what separated him from

the churches he loved. In the new creation, everything that threatens, separates, and destroys is gone.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The City Comes Down**

Notice the direction. The city doesn't go up; it comes down. Many people think the Christian hope is about leaving earth and going up to heaven. But at the end of Revelation, heaven comes down to earth. The new Jerusalem descends, and God makes His home with people. The prayer Jesus taught us, Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10), is finally answered completely.

Then a voice from the throne speaks the most wonderful words in the Bible. God's dwelling place is now with His people, and He will live with them. They'll be His people, and He will be their God, living with them Himself. And then: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

BACKGROUND CHECK **No More Tears**

Read that slowly. No more death. No more mourning. No more crying. No more pain. Think of everything that makes you cry: losing someone you love, being lonely, being bullied, feeling like a failure, sickness, divorce, injustice, fear. God says all of that is the old order of things, and it will be gone. And notice who does the wiping. Not an angel. God Himself, with His own hand, wipes the tears from your eyes. That doesn't mean your tears don't matter now. It means God takes them so seriously that He's going to end the reasons for them forever.

Then the one on the throne says: "I am making everything new!" Notice He doesn't say I am making new things. He says He's making everything new, including you. He tells John to write it down, because these words can be trusted. And He says, It is done. He is the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End, and He promises to

give water from the spring of life, free of charge, to anyone who is thirsty.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Who Is Left Out?**
>
> Right after the promise of free water, there's a warning. The cowardly and unbelieving, murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars will be in the lake of fire. That list can sound terrifying, especially if you see yourself in it. Who hasn't lied? But remember the context. The cowardly are those who deny Jesus to save their own skin, and the list describes people who keep on living this way and refuse God's free gift. The invitation comes first. Anyone who is thirsty can come. If you see yourself in the list, that's a reason to run to the Lamb, not away from Him. The same book says His blood washes robes white.

One of the angels who had the bowls now shows John the bride, the Lamb's wife. He takes John to a high mountain and shows him Jerusalem, the Holy City, descending from heaven, shining with God's glory like a precious jewel, clear as crystal.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **A City Shaped Like a Cube**
>
> John's description of the city is full of symbols. It has a massive, high wall, twelve gates, and the names of Israel's twelve tribes on the gates. It has twelve foundations, bearing the names of the Lamb's twelve apostles. God's people from both Testaments are one family. The angel measures the city with a golden rod. It's 12,000 stadia long, wide, and high. The NIV footnote says that's about 1,400 miles, roughly the distance from New York to Dallas. And it's a perfect cube. In the Old Testament, only one room was a perfect cube: the Most Holy Place in the temple, where God's presence dwelt (1 Kings 6:20). Only the high priest could go in, once a year. In the new Jerusalem, the whole city is the Most Holy Place, and all of God's people live in God's presence all the time. The wall is 144 cubits thick, twelve times twelve again.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gold, Jewels, and Pearls**

The city is made of pure gold, as clear as glass, and its foundations are decorated with twelve precious stones, which are similar to the stones on the high priest's breastplate (Exodus 28:17–20). That means all of God's people are now priests. The twelve gates are each carved from one pearl. The street is pure gold, transparent as glass. Some people take these details literally. Others see them as a way of saying that the city is unimaginably beautiful and valuable, more than anything we know. Either way, there's an irony. On earth, people fight over gold. In the new Jerusalem, it's used to pave the street. The things the world values most are, in God's city, as ordinary as asphalt.

John notices there's no temple in the city at all. Its temple is God Almighty, together with the Lamb. Sun and moon aren't needed, because God's glory lights the city, and the Lamb is the lamp that shines there. Its gates stay open forever, because night never comes. The nations will walk in its light, and earth's kings will carry their splendor into it. Nothing impure gets in, only people whose names are listed in the book of life that belongs to the Lamb.

BACKGROUND CHECK **No Temple**

For the Jews, the temple was the place where heaven and earth met, where God lived among His people. In the new creation, there's no need for a temple, because God is everywhere, and nothing separates Him from His people. You won't have to go to a building to meet God. You'll live in His presence all the time. Notice too that the gates are always open, and earthly kings bring their glory in. The best of human culture, art, music, and creativity, purified from sin, may find a place in the new creation.

Then the angel shows John the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing out from God's throne and the Lamb's throne down the middle of the city's great street. On both banks of the river grows the tree of life, producing twelve kinds of fruit, a different crop every month. "And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of

the nations." There will be no more curse. God's throne and the Lamb's will stand in the city, and all His servants will worship and serve Him. "They will see his face," with His name written on their foreheads. Night will be gone for good, and they will reign forever.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Back to the Garden**

The Bible begins in a garden, with a river and the tree of life (Genesis 2:9–10). When Adam and Eve sinned, they were cut off from the tree of life, and the ground was cursed (Genesis 3:17–24). Now, at the very end, the tree of life is back, the river is flowing, and the curse is gone. But it's not just a return to the garden. It's better. The garden has become a city, full of people from every nation. Ezekiel saw a similar river flowing from the temple, with trees whose leaves were for healing (Ezekiel 47:1–12). The whole story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is God's plan to get back what was lost, and more.

BACKGROUND CHECK **They Will See His Face**

In the Old Testament, God told Moses that no one could see His face and live (Exodus 33:20). Seeing God face to face was the one thing no human being could do. But in the new creation, God's people will see His face. Jesus said the pure in heart will see God (Matthew 5:8). John wrote in his first letter that when Jesus appears, we'll see Him as He is (1 John 3:2). That's the greatest promise in the whole Bible. Not streets of gold. Not even the end of tears. Seeing God's face.

The book ends with a series of final words. The angel says the words can be trusted completely. Jesus says, three times, that He is coming soon (22:7, 12, 20). John falls down to worship the angel again, and again the angel stops him. John is told to leave the prophecy unsealed, because the time is near. Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." He blesses those who wash their robes, so they may enjoy the tree of life and walk into the city. He calls Himself David's Root and Offspring, and the bright Morning Star.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Seal It Up**

Daniel was told to seal up his prophecy until the time of the end (Daniel 12:4). John is told the opposite: don't seal it up. Revelation isn't a locked code for some future generation. It's meant to be opened, read, and lived now. That's been the point all along. It's not a puzzle to solve, but a message to obey.

Then comes the greatest invitation in the Bible: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Come**

Revelation began with a vision of Jesus in glory, and it ends with an invitation. The Spirit says come. The church says come. And anyone who is thirsty is invited to come and drink, for free. The water of life isn't earned. It's a gift. If you've read this whole book, and this whole series, and you've never come to Jesus, this is your invitation. Come. And if you already belong to Him, your job is to join the Spirit and the bride, and say to your friends: come.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Don't Add or Take Away**

John ends with a serious warning: anyone who adds to the words of this prophecy, or takes away from them, will face the plagues and lose their place at the tree of life. That echoes Deuteronomy 4:2. In context, it's a warning about this book, not about the whole Bible, which hadn't yet been gathered together. It's a warning against twisting Revelation to say what you want, either by adding predictions it doesn't make, or by cutting out the parts you don't like. People who use Revelation to set dates, or who ignore its call to faithfulness, should take this warning seriously.

And then, the last words of Jesus in the Bible. The one who testifies to all this says it once more: Yes, I am coming soon. And John answers for all of us: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Maranatha**

The early Christians had a prayer in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke: Maranatha. It means Come, Lord, or Our Lord, come. Paul used it at the end of 1 Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:22), and an early Christian manual called the Didache includes it in a prayer after the Lord's Supper. It's one of the oldest Christian prayers we know. John's Come, Lord Jesus is the same prayer. It's the prayer of people who love Jesus and can't wait to see Him. It's not a prayer of fear. It's a prayer of longing, like waiting at the airport for someone you love.

The very last verse of the Bible is a blessing: the Lord Jesus' grace, for all God's people. Amen. The Bible doesn't end with a beast, a battle, or a warning. It ends with grace.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The End of the Story, and of This Series**

We started this series with Matthew, and a family tree that began with Abraham. We followed Jesus through four Gospels: His birth, His teaching, His miracles, His death, and His resurrection. We watched His followers turn the world upside down in Acts. We read Paul's letters, and Hebrews, and the letters of James, Peter, John, and Jude. And now we've reached the end. Here's what the whole New Testament says: God loves the world. He sent His Son. The Lamb was slain and is alive. He's on the throne. And one day He'll come back and make everything new. The story isn't over, and you're part of it. Keep reading. Keep following the Lamb. And keep praying the last prayer in the Bible.

KEY VERSE

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

Revelation 21:5 (NIV)

REAL TALK

1. What do you most look forward to in the new creation? What do you most look forward to being gone?
2. How does knowing that heaven comes down to earth change the way you think about this world and how you treat it?
3. What does it mean to you that God's people will see His face?
4. Can you honestly pray Come, Lord Jesus? What makes it easy or hard?

TRY THIS *Read Genesis 1–3 and Revelation 21–22 side by side. List every connection you can find between the beginning and the end of the Bible. Then end your day by praying the last prayer in the Bible: Come, Lord Jesus.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Now What? The Bottom Line

You've just read the last book of the Bible. The story that started in a garden ends in a garden city, where God lives with His people and wipes away every tear. At the center is the slain Lamb, alive again. And near the end, the Spirit and the bride both call out, Come. That invitation is for you.

Here's what the Bible says, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you more than you can imagine. He wants you to know Him.

> *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (NIV)**

2 We've all turned away.

We've all gone our own way instead of God's. John says that if we claim to have no sin, we're fooling ourselves. The Bible calls it sin, and it separates us from God.

> *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* **Romans 3:23 (NIV)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (NIV)**

4 Jesus came for you.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. God didn't wait for us to love Him first.

> *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (NIV)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.* **Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* **Romans 10:9 (NIV)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, I've been running my own life, and I've sinned against You. I can't fix that myself. Thank You for loving me first. Thank You that Jesus died for me and rose again. I believe You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus*

as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Help me follow the Lamb everywhere He leads, and fill me with hope for the day You make all things new. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Revelation straight through, maybe in one sitting, the way its first hearers did. Then go back to Matthew and start the whole New Testament again. You'll see things you missed.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Join the song. Revelation is full of worship. Make praise a daily habit, and worship with God's people every week.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. John wrote down what he saw and heard so you could check it out for yourself. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Revelation is right, the Lamb is on the throne, the story has a good ending, and He's standing at the door, knocking.

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon."
Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Revelation 22:20 (NIV)