

Today

Jan/Feb 2024

refresh, refocus, renew

THE KINGDOM CHORUS



ALSO: SEVEN LETTERS TO THE CHURCH

Dear Friends:

As the new year begins, we continue to celebrate Jesus' coming and the good news he has brought into our world. What is that "good news"? It has to do with the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus' death for our sake—and it also involves the coming of the kingdom of God, as Jesus taught in his ministry among us.



This month, Pastor Bob Arbogast artfully unpacks Jesus' preaching and teaching about God's kingdom: its coming, its certain presence now, and its sure, final fulfillment when God's full plan of redemption will be realized at Jesus' return. And, most importantly, Jesus' teaching of the kingdom calls us to faithful living today.

Then, in February, Pastor Evan Heerema shares a series of meditations from the book of Revelation. Although Revelation can be daunting to study because of its many puzzling visions and sometimes shocking images, here we take an in-depth look at the very real, concrete challenges facing the seven churches addressed in the book's first three chapters. Focusing on these early churches in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) reminds us that many of the church's struggles of long ago remain with us today, and that Jesus Christ himself, the Lord of the church, still calls his body, now spread throughout the earth, to faith and faithfulness.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and stylized, with a long horizontal line extending from the end.

Kurt Selles

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"The Kingdom Chorus"
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**"Seven Letters
to the Church"**
Evan P. Heerema

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**ReFrame
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january

The Kingdom Chorus

Bob Arbogast

This month we focus on one of the great themes of the New Testament: the kingdom of God. From the first chapter of the book of Matthew to the final chapter of the book of Revelation, the New Testament Scriptures reveal the true King and his kingdom. For thirty-one days we will ponder King Jesus and his kingdom. May this journey at the start of a new year be rewarding for us all.

Bob Arbogast is the pastor of Celebration Fellowship church, a multisite prison church in Ionia, Michigan. In his spare time he plays guitar in a West Michigan blues band. He and his wife, Jan, have three adult daughters.

THE CHORUS IS THE THING

"The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign . . . forever; his kingdom will never end."

—Luke 1:32-33

As I write this, I'm visiting with my brother, his wife, and their cat, Bennie. Ever since I arrived, I catch myself singing the chorus of an old Elton John song: "B-B-B-Bennie and the Jets!" Meeting Bennie the cat and seeing him around the house has brought that chorus from the fringe of my mind to the center.

Something like that has happened for me with the New Testament too. A theme that was on the fringe is now front and center. Because it *is* the center. That theme is the kingdom of God.

When we read Luke 1, we focus on angels and announcements. We focus on the birth of John the Baptist and the impending birth of Jesus. All great stuff!

But here's what we tend to miss. Jesus comes to be a

king. He comes to reign over a kingdom. It's the kingdom of his father David (an ancestor who lived about 1,000 years earlier). But, more than that, it's the kingdom of God.

That's where our attention will be this month. Because the kingdom of God is the chorus that repeats throughout the New Testament. And like any good chorus, it's really the point of the song.

So let's give it a listen. It may even start us singing. I think Bennie would like that.

God our Father, may your name be hallowed, may your kingdom come, and may your will be done on earth—the same as in heaven. Amen.

IT'S THE GOSPEL CHORUS

"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations."
—Matthew 24:14

I suppose we all have people we don't trust. For one thing, it's hard to trust somebody who doesn't tell the truth. But sometimes untrustworthy people do manage to tell the truth. And sometimes even demons do.

As Jesus cast out demons at Simon's house, those demons said, "You are the Son of God!" It was the truth, of course. Somehow the demons knew Jesus was the Messiah.

As the Son of God, Jesus was the long-promised "Anointed One" (Messiah, Christ) who would bring a new era of peace, justice, and righteousness for God's people (Isaiah 42-43; 49-53). This was the good news ("the gospel") that would go out to all nations.

So Jesus came as the king of God's people (Israel). No wonder he said he was sent to proclaim the good news of the

kingdom of God. What else would the king do? The "good news" is "the gospel"—and that makes "the kingdom of God" the gospel chorus, the repeating theme of God's great work through Jesus.

The apostle Paul sang this chorus. He told the elders of the church at Ephesus that he was given "the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace." Then he described that task as "preaching the kingdom" (Acts 20:24-25).

For Jesus and for Paul, the kingdom of God is at the center. It can't be any other way because that's the gospel truth.

King Jesus, I welcome the good news about you and your kingdom. That news can change the way I see everything. Please make it so. Amen.

BIG PROBLEM, BIG SOLUTION

The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

—Romans 8:21

First, the bad news. You and I and every last human being on this earth are damaged goods. We're bent out of shape by sin. We're guilty of everything from minor missteps to major crimes. We're in desperate need of forgiveness and a fresh start.

But that's not the half of it. The bad news keeps coming. Selfishness, injustice, hatred, indifference, violence. It all cracks the foundations of our societies and sets us against each other. The earth itself suffers under the weight of our greed and pride and war. And then there are spiritual forces of evil—principalities and powers—that oppose everything good.

So the problem is bigger than your sinfulness or mine. So much bigger. And if we look at

it all long and hard, it can seem hopeless.

That's what makes the news of the kingdom of God so good. The kingdom is God's salvation for a broken, twisted, suffering world. In the kingdom there will be no more war. War that ends lives and scars them; war that levels cities and poisons the ground. In the kingdom there will be justice for discarded communities and reconciliation at every level.

One day the kingdom will be a new creation, aflame with the glory and goodness of God. And the news will always be good.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the big hope of your kingdom and for every little sign of its coming. Amen.

A ROYAL MESS

*You have . . . crowned [human beings] with glory and honor.
You have made them rulers over the works of your hands. . . .*

—Psalm 8:5-6

A few years ago, the prison church I serve spent 16 weeks reading the Bible books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. It was mostly a depressing experience as the story turned from bad to worse. That's when it struck me that the Old Testament is a long meditation on the subject of kingship.

The first Old Testament story (Genesis 1) assigns to human beings a royal responsibility over God's created world. The next story (Genesis 2) pictures that responsibility as the careful tending of a garden. In the stories that follow, human beings quickly lose interest in serving God. Instead they want to become gods themselves.

From there it's all misery and ruin. Until God takes things in hand and begins a long, even tortured process of putting

things right. God sets out to establish his kingdom among the family of Abraham. God himself will be the King.

But soon enough the people of that kingdom lose confidence in their divine King. They want the kind of king everyone else has. So that's what they get. And as we can see in the books of Samuel and Kings, it's not a pretty picture.

No wonder a hunger develops for an ideal king and an ideal kingdom. But that's a kingdom only God can establish.

Jesus, you are the ideal King. You are God's answer to the world's aching need. You are the one who will make everything right. All glory belongs to you! Amen.

OUR KINGDOM PRAYER

"Your kingdom come. . . ."

—Matthew 6:10

Jesus' followers have been saying the Lord's Prayer since he taught it to them. Many of us know this prayer so well that we can say it without thinking. But if we look carefully at this prayer, we can see that it's a kingdom prayer. This shows up in the first things we ask for when we say the Lord's Prayer.

We ask for God's name to be hallowed. We ask for God's kingdom to be established. We ask for God's will to be accomplished. And we ask for all of this to happen on earth the same as it is done in heaven.

Heaven and earth are not the same. In heaven every creature worships God. In heaven every creature welcomes God's rule. In heaven every creature does God's will. And all of this accomplishes God's purposes in heaven.

On earth we often fail to honor God's holiness through worship. We tend to save our worship for heroes. On earth we fail to fully accept God's rule. We prefer being in charge ourselves. On earth we often ignore God's will. We have our own projects and plans. All of this thwarts God's purposes on earth.

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we are begging for earthly reality to reflect heavenly reality. And we are committing to do our part by following the way of the kingdom as Jesus has taught us.

Lord, so let it be!

Our Father in heaven, may your name be hallowed, your kingdom be established, and your will be accomplished, on earth the same as in heaven. Help us to do our part. Amen.

KINGDOM EPIPHANY

The LORD Most High is . . . the great King over all the earth.

—Psalm 47:2

We usually think of kings as men who have political and military power. But King Jesus has a different kind of power. He has the power to take certain things that have gone terribly wrong and put them right. So instead of launching wars, Jesus heals the sick, gives sight to the blind, and casts out demons.

One day a Canaanite woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon comes to Jesus. She asks him for help because a demon has hold of her daughter. But Jesus says nothing. When his disciples urge him to send her away, he says that he was sent to tend the flock of Israel. But the woman spars with him, insisting that God's goodness extends beyond Israel. And of course she is right. Jesus commends her for her great faith, and her daughter is healed immediately.

Today is Epiphany, the celebration of Jesus' being made known to the peoples of the world. In the story of the Canaanite woman, we can see Jesus celebrating this good news too. Though he was sent to "the lost sheep of Israel," he would soon be sending his followers to all nations (Matthew 24:14; Acts 1:8). And he had already begun showing them that this was God's intention (Matthew 8:5-13, 28-34).

This may not be an epiphany for you, especially if you already know that God loves the whole world (John 3:16). Even so, it reminds us not to think small when it comes to God's kingdom.

Jesus, thank you for bringing the good news to all nations, and help us to follow your lead, in faith. Amen.

A KINGDOM FOR ALL

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.
—Revelation 7:9

It's hard to imagine what the 40 days after Jesus' resurrection were like for the apostles. But we know this much: Jesus came and went according to his own sense of time and purpose. And whenever he was with his followers, he taught them more about the kingdom of God.

The apostles caught his drift. It was hard to miss!

Then one day they asked if the time had finally come for him to restore the kingdom of Israel. That was a bit off-track. But it's no wonder they were thinking in terms of just their own people. That was the hope they had grown up with.

Yet the time for the kingdom would be more than just that moment. And the home of the kingdom would be more than just Israel. Over long ages, the Spirit of God would equip the

apostles and the whole church to carry the good news to the ends of the earth. And all the earth, with all its kingdoms and dominions, with all its peoples and nations, would hear about King Jesus and his kingdom.

That's how I heard about Jesus and his kingdom. That's how you heard the good news too.

Jesus, thank you for equipping your followers and your church with good news through the power of your Spirit. May the news of your kingdom continue to ring. Amen.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

"Suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple."

—Malachi 3:1

When Jesus is 40 days old, his parents bring him to the temple to present the required offering after a son is born. It's a big day. Here's why.

When the Israelites, under Moses, set up a tabernacle (a portable temple) in the wilderness, a cloud of glory signaled the presence of God. God was there in the midst of his people. Later, when they built a temple, under Solomon, the cloud of glory filled it to overflowing. God was enthroned in the temple as Israel's true King.

Many years later, the prophet Ezekiel saw God's throne leave the temple—and the cloud of glory with it (Ezekiel 10). Soon the temple itself lay in ruins, destroyed by Babylon. Later the people of Israel returned from exile and built another temple. But this time there was no cloud of glory, no sign that

God had come to live in the new temple.

Many more years later, Mary and Joseph came to the temple carrying Jesus. And the Lord, Israel's true King, was in the midst of his people once again. What kind of king will he be? And what kind of kingdom will he bring?

We are faced with those questions to this day. How will we welcome King Jesus and his kingdom? With humility? With joy? With thanksgiving? With hope? With holy obedience? The answer is in our lives and in the life of the church.

Jesus, you came to live among us for a while. And you will come again. We want to welcome you wherever you appear. And wherever you are, your kingdom is. Amen.

A WORD ABOUT THE WORDS

Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.
—Matthew 27:38

It's important to note that our use of the words *king* and *kingdom* can be misleading when we talk about God and Jesus. These words that are so familiar to us may get us in the ballpark of understanding—but just barely. That's because Jesus is not like other kings, and the kingdom of God is not like other kingdoms.

The mother of James and John finds this out when she asks Jesus for a favor. She's proud of her boys. So she asks Jesus to give them the top spots in his kingdom, to make them his right-hand and left-hand men. But Jesus says no; those places are already reserved. We gain a hint of what that means when we learn later that two rebels are crucified on either side of Jesus. So cross and kingdom are connected.

Other kings would take up a sword and lead an army against

the enemies of their people. But Jesus is not like other kings. He deals with great enemies by letting himself be defeated by them on the cross. Then that cross becomes the sign of the kingdom of God, which is not like other kingdoms. Because in the kingdom of God "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

So whenever you see one of those roadside displays of three crosses, remember that Jesus and his kingdom are not like anything else in this world.

Jesus, I'm usually ashamed when I'm weak. So I try to act strong. Help me to trust that your power is made perfect in weakness, even in my weakness. Amen.

A KINGDOM LIKE NO OTHER

The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

—Mark 15:26

Suppose you went to Jerusalem, looking for God, in the time of the kings of Israel. The locals would tell you, “You’ve come to the right place.” And they would point to Solomon’s temple, saying, “That’s where God is.” Because at the heart of the temple, behind a thick curtain and between golden cherubs, God was enthroned as King.

By the time of Jesus, however, history has taken its toll. Solomon’s temple is long gone. A new temple has taken its place.

Well, suppose you came to Jerusalem in those days, on a certain Friday afternoon, looking for God. Where would the locals point?

The news that afternoon was stunning. The temple curtain was torn. And there was nothing behind it: no golden cherubs, no ark of the covenant,

and certainly not God. Some of the locals might take you outside the city walls to a rugged hill called Golgotha. And they might point toward a dead figure on a cross and say, “There. That’s where God is.” Because the sign above the corpse is right. This is THE KING OF THE JEWS. The Roman commander is right too. This is the Son of God.

What sort of kingdom can it be when the king is a dead guy on a cross, and when that dead guy is the Son of God? A kingdom like no other. That’s for sure.

Jesus, you are a king like no other whose kingdom is like no other. Help your church to be a people like no other—in all the best ways. Amen.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."
—Luke 6:20

The Bible says, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." We see it in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, where the love of money has closed off Scrooge's heart. And hasn't money shattered countless families throughout history?!

Apparently the dangers of money increase as we get more of it. Because few of us can resist the seductions of wealth. We fall into a money trap. All we want is more. No wonder Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24).

When we hear that, we may think Jesus is talking about salvation and warning that wealth gets in the way. Because, if nothing else, having a pile of money can make us feel im-

mune from everything, even from the justice of God. But I think Jesus may have something more immediate in mind: living the way of God's kingdom here and now.

Wealth can put the squeeze on us and keep us from living the way of God's kingdom. And, proportionally, people who have less tend to be more generous than people who have more. No wonder Jesus says to people who are poor, "Yours is the kingdom of God." Their generosity already fits.

Lord, "give me neither poverty nor riches" (Proverbs 30:8). Help me to trust your generosity enough to be generous like you. Amen.

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
—John 1:5

Here's the gospel (the "good news"): Jesus delivers the people of God from the dominion of darkness and brings them into the kingdom of light. There is no better news!

Here's the background: Sin had plunged God's people into darkness. They had no temple, no king, and no homeland. The problem was their own repeated sin of turning away from God and pursuing the sinful excesses of neighboring kingdoms. So God sent other nations, that were bent on conquest, to uproot his people and take them into exile. In a long era of gloom, Israel's hope grew dim.

But when the time was right, God sent his Son to bring Israel out of darkness and into light. And not just Israel—because Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). On the cross he

broke the back of darkness, because forgiveness of sins leads back to the light.

Beyond our "little" sins, Jesus has secured forgiveness for our love of darkness. This frees us from the clutches of darkness and brings us into the light of the kingdom of God.

We still live in a dark world. The drumbeat of tragedies and atrocities never stops. But we have the privilege and the duty to reflect the light of God's kingdom into the world. We do it by keeping the law of Christ: loving and serving both God and neighbor with joy.

Lord Jesus, whenever it's dark, wherever it's dark, and however it's dark, I want to shine. Jesus, help me to shine! Amen.

BEYOND US

"So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."
—Acts 11:18

An old hymn reminds us that "God moves in a mysterious way." Sometimes that's more than God's people can handle. Acts 11 shows how the brand-new church in Jerusalem was unsure what to do when Gentiles came to faith in Jesus. They were surprised and wondered what God was up to.

In a parable in Mark 4, Jesus says the kingdom of God is like seed scattered on soil. The seed sprouts and grows, taking on a life of its own. Eventually there is a harvest. Nowadays we can explain all the processes that produce a harvest. But 2,000 years ago those processes were a mystery, something beyond explanation and yet wonderful.

Similarly, the kingdom of God is wonderful and often beyond explaining. Like planted seed, the kingdom has a life of its own. The kingdom is outside

our control. It grows and bears fruit however God pleases, without our intervention. It's not that God doesn't use us in the processes of the kingdom. But the kingdom is full of surprises—as surprising as Gentiles joining with Jews into one church.

Have you seen God move in mysterious ways? Has God given you or your church unexpected opportunities to offer hospitality, to practice generosity, even to tear down boundaries that would keep people out? How wonderful is that?!

Lord Jesus, you are the greatest kingdom mystery of all. You became human so that we can become more human than we have ever been. That's beyond us! Amen.

NOT FROM THIS WORLD

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant."
—Mark 10:43

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem didn't want Jesus as their king. They brought him to the Roman governor, Pilate, and he played that up for what it was worth. Though he could not find a reason to charge Jesus, Pilate went along with the people and sentenced him to death anyway. As a final taunt, Pilate placed a sign on the cross: JESUS OF NAZARETH: THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Pilate sparred with Jesus about it too: "You're the king of the Jews, right?" Jesus refused the bait: "You think a king has sword-wielding soldiers at his command. But my kingdom isn't like that."

You wouldn't know it from looking at the church, though. The church long ago made peace with the kingdoms of this world. The church even sent its children to war in the name of the kingdoms of this world.

But Jesus said his kingdom is "not from this world." (That's a better translation than "not of this world.") The way of his kingdom is not borrowed from Rome or any other kingdom.

The way of Jesus' kingdom is mercy, not brutality; joy, not misery; reconciliation, not enmity. The way of his kingdom doesn't destroy a village in order to save it. Instead the King himself endures destruction in order to save the world.

The kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. God's kingdom is not from this world but from the world to come.

Forgive your church, Lord Jesus. We forsake the way of your kingdom too easily and in too many ways. Have mercy on us, we pray. Amen.

MLK AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.

—Revelation 7:9

In the United States today we commemorate the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK). As we should. King dreamed about the kingdom of God—where the children of former slaves and the children of former slaveowners would see each other as family, and where everyone would share equally in freedom and justice. King also did what he could to make that kingdom dream real, even at the cost of his own life.

I grew up in the world King was trying to change. And when I was about five years old, I got to live into some of that change. A new family moved in across from us. Right away, my brother, Tom, and I met Cheryl and Larry. They were black, and we were white. And in no time at all we were friends.

When I was five, I had never heard of the kingdom of God. But I had seen a glimpse of it. Because in the kingdom, we all will be children of God together. I can hardly wait. How about you?

Meanwhile, I keep wondering: What can I do, and what can the church do, to make the kingdom real? Do you think maybe we have to become more like children?

King Jesus, you urge us not just to welcome little children but to become like little children. How else will we see the kingdom? How else will we make the kingdom real? So help us. Amen.

TELL IT SLANT

Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror. . . .
—1 Corinthians 13:12 (NLT)

If you were a kid like I was in the 1960s, you might remember Sergeant Joe Friday from the TV show *Dragnet*. Friday was a no-nonsense police officer. When he questioned a witness, he didn't want to hear stories or opinions. "Just the facts," he would insist. And by the end of each episode, with the facts in hand, Friday would make an arrest.

A focus on facts may be right for a police investigation. But things are different with the kingdom of God. When Jesus talks about the kingdom, he doesn't rattle off a set of facts. And he never offers a definition. Because the truth of the kingdom is more than we could ever take in.

Instead Jesus gives us glimpses of the kingdom through stories and pictures. He says the kingdom of God is "like a mustard seed." Or like many

other things. Yet what Jesus says about the kingdom isn't necessarily obvious, even to the disciples.

The same is true about what Jesus does. Just after the mustard seed story in Mark 4, we see Jesus calming a dangerous storm out on a lake. That certainly said something about Jesus as King. But it wasn't altogether clear. The disciples were left asking, "Who is this?" (Mark 4:41).

Let's listen to some more of Jesus' stories and watch some of his deeds to learn what we can about the kingdom and its King.

Teach me, Lord Jesus. I want to know who you are and what your kingdom is about. How else can I serve you? Amen.

KIDS' STUFF

"People [won't] say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."
—Luke 17:21

Here's an old Bob Dylan lyric: "I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." When I hear that, I first picture a foolish young man. He's sure he knows what's what. Then I picture a wise older man. Like a child, he embraces the mystery of what he doesn't understand. Is that maybe how it is with the kingdom of God?

People were bringing little kids—even babies—to Jesus. Parents wanted Jesus to bless their little ones. But the disciples knew better: Jesus was busy with important stuff, grown-up stuff. There was no time to waste on little kids.

Well, Jesus set them straight, didn't he? "Cut it out!" he said. "Let the kids come right here to me. Don't you know that the kingdom of God is *their* kingdom? That God is *their* God?"

The kingdom of God is kids' stuff. And if we grown-ups don't add a bunch of big words and picky rules, then kids will see the kingdom for what it is. And they will welcome it the way they welcome a carnival or a snow day. When something so unexpected and so wonderful comes along, of course they'll want to be a part of it!

If we grown-ups don't feel the same way about the kingdom of God, we've most likely missed the point.

Come on, Jesus. Bring your kingdom. We want to ride all day for free! Amen.

MORE THAN FAIR

"Are you envious because I am generous?"

—Matthew 20:15

From the time we are little children, we have a keen sense of fairness. So if my mom gave my brother a piece of cake just a little bigger than the one she gave me, I would protest: "That's not fair!"

Jesus told lots of parables—stories that use familiar scenes and images from daily life to teach about the kingdom of God. These stories are often surprising, and sometimes even shocking. For example, some of Jesus' parables include outcomes that don't seem fair—and that can surprise us or even make us upset. But what if fairness is not the point?

In today's story about day-laborers in a vineyard, the issue of fairness comes up in a big way. When the landowner pays all of the laborers for a full day, no matter how many hours they have worked, the laborers who worked all day

protest: "We worked the whole day. The sun beat down on us for hours. Why should the people who worked only one hour get the same pay as we do?" This is certainly not fair. But fairness is not the point.

The kingdom of God is not fair. It's much more than fair. The kingdom of God is generous. Jesus is a generous King. He gives us all that he promises and more than we deserve.

Generous Lord Jesus, thank you for who you are and for what you do. Help us to be grateful for your generosity to us, and help us to show the same generosity to others. Amen.

NOT MUCH TO LOOK AT

"You gave me something to eat . . . [and] to drink, . . . you invited me in, . . . you clothed me, . . . you looked after me, . . . you came to visit me."
—Matthew 25:35-36

When people have a stake in something, they tend to puff it up. It's the newest, the fastest, the brightest, the strongest. Not Jesus. He says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

A mustard seed is tiny. Looking at it, you wouldn't expect it to amount to much. And like any seed, it's dependent on outside conditions—soil, moisture, sunshine—to germinate and grow.

Farmers today plant millions of soybean seeds in a single field. They make sure to plant plenty because they know they'll have a 20 to 30 percent loss. Home gardeners plant several squash seeds in every hill because some of those seeds may fail to germinate and some of the young plants may not mature.

But Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a single, small seed. Everything is staked on that one, tiny seed. If it fails to ger-

minate, if it fails to grow, then all is lost. But when that one seed does sprout and grow, it becomes something far beyond its humble beginning: a safe and shady perch for a choir of songbirds.

In the same way, the kingdom of God may not look like much. But here and there, almost invisibly, it welcomes, shelters, and supports life. Maybe you're a part of that through a local congregation. I hope so.

Lord Jesus, give us faith to see your kingdom all around us. And give us courage to make your kingdom visible, even in the smallest ways. Amen.

APPLICATION ACCEPTED

"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."
—Matthew 5:20

College admissions are competitive. So our daughter's high-school guidance counselor recommended ways to sweeten her applications. I told the counselor not to worry. Our daughter would be going to our church-sponsored college. To get accepted, all she had to do was apply.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day were determined to keep the Law of Moses faithfully. They figured their righteousness would help bring the kingdom of God and would ensure their place in it. What a surprise they had when Jesus said that sex workers and turncoat tax collectors were going into the kingdom ahead of them!

What!? Was the kingdom of God just free for the taking, with no special application requirements? To the Pharisees, that couldn't be. They had

staked their lives on the Law of Moses. They were not about to turn to a different way.

But Jesus is the righteous one. He brings the kingdom. And those traitorous tax collectors and sex workers were trusting in him. They had repented and now believed in Jesus, the way to the kingdom of God.

They certainly had no righteousness of their own. But that was okay. They had Jesus. So all they had to do was come to the kingdom, trusting in him.

That's all any of us has to do. Come. Just come to Jesus and his kingdom.

Jesus, I come to you and to your kingdom. Show me the way of your kingdom every day. And help me to follow it. Amen.

KINGDOM RIGHTEOUSNESS

Christ Jesus . . . has become . . . our righteousness. . . .

—1 Corinthians 1:30

Here's the main entrance requirement for the kingdom of God: *You must have a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees.* Well, good luck with that! The Pharisees were amazing. They kept the law of Moses better than anyone. The apostle Paul says that when he was a Pharisee, his law-based righteousness was faultless (Philippians 3:5-6). Who could possibly top that?

But could there be a different way instead of trying to do the Pharisees one better? There has to be, because Paul explains that the Pharisees' way doesn't work. We are all sinners, and none of us can keep the law perfectly—so none of us can claim to be righteous (see Romans 3-7).

But what if the purpose of the law was to point out our sin and show us that we need a Savior? And what if Jesus ful-

filled the purpose of the law for us through his death on the cross? What greater righteousness could there be? And what if this righteousness could be ours through the gift of Jesus? What if Jesus himself is our righteousness? Well, he is. And he is the one who brings us into the kingdom!

No one enters the kingdom of God by having the best behavior, but only by having faith in the King, Jesus. That's how the repentant tax collectors and sex workers entered the kingdom ahead of the Pharisees. Jesus was their righteousness. Now that's good news!

Jesus, thank you for taking sin out of the way so that we can enter the kingdom of God. Help me to trust that. Amen.

KINGDOM BLESSINGS

The apostles left . . . rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. —Acts 5:41

More than once in these meditations, I have referred to the way of the kingdom. There's no definition for it. But in our reading from Matthew 5 today—often called “The Beatitudes”—Jesus names a number of desires, attitudes, and behaviors that are part of the kingdom “way.”

As you read the Beatitudes, imagine the community Jesus describes. It's a community of people who are humble, meek, and pure-hearted; who mourn over sorrow and pain; who show mercy and make peace—all because they hunger and thirst for what is right.

You would think this kind of community would be inoffensive. That neighbors would be happy to have them around. But Jesus says the community may also be persecuted: hated, insulted, excluded, falsely accused, and more.

The sticking point is Jesus himself—and the community's first loyalty to him. That's because the world and its kingdoms would rather be first in our lives. So trouble may come to us who live by the way of the kingdom.

But blessings come too. There's comfort to ease our sorrow and pain. Mercy to overcome injustice. Satisfaction in working for changes to do what's right. There's also welcome in the household of God—a place to call home, a place to belong. Above all, in the kingdom itself we will see and live with God!

Jesus, thank you for showing us a better “way” and for going ahead of us. What a wonderful hope we have in you: the kingdom of God! Amen.

A SURE THING

"Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

—Matthew 11:6

John the Baptist had come to prepare the way for Jesus, the Messiah. And John was so confident! He had a clear and sure word from God, just as you would expect from a prophet.

But in our reading today from Matthew 11, John has his doubts. Prison will do that to a person, making him question everything he's sure of. What John has heard doesn't measure up to the big hopes he has had for Jesus. God's people are no closer to being free. Nor is John himself. So John sends a message to Jesus: "Have I been wrong about you?"

Jesus has nothing new to tell John. But he does encourage him not to lose hope: "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

John had his expectations of Jesus. We all do. But Jesus doesn't act according to any-

one's expectations. He acts according to the Father's plan. Jesus encourages John—and all of us—to trust that plan. The kingdom will come in God's way and in God's time.

There's an old hymn that gets it just right: "For not with swords' loud clashing or roll of stirring drums—with deeds of love and mercy the heavenly kingdom comes." Of course the greatest deed of love and mercy is Jesus' self-surrender on the cross. That one deed makes the kingdom a sure thing.

Generous Lord Jesus, thank you for who you are and for what you do. Help us to be grateful for your generosity to us and to show the same generosity to others. Amen.

NOW AND FOREVER

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

—Matthew 19:24

The kingdom of God is eternal. It's the ultimate reality, when everything will be good at last. Surprisingly, though, the kingdom is also right here, right now—wherever Jesus is present in the flesh or by the Spirit. We can see that in Matthew 19.

A rich man who comes to talk with Jesus is very interested in having eternal life—that is, life in the kingdom of God. But does he really want that kind of life? When Jesus tells the man, "Sell everything, give to the poor, and follow me," the man can't do it. He can't take those three steps.

It's really hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. That's what Jesus says. And he means more than entering the eternal kingdom in the future. He also means living the way of the kingdom right here, right now.

Among other things, the way of the kingdom is selfless and generous. And the way of the kingdom includes deeply trusting in God to meet every need. Sadly, the rich man in this story wasn't ready to live that way. Not here, not now.

How about you? Are you ready to live the way of the kingdom here and now? If not, will you want to live that way in eternity?

Lord Jesus, fears grip us, and things grip us—and it's hard to break free. Help me to let go of everything but you so that I can live the way of the kingdom right here, right now. Amen.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS . . .

"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like . . . ?"

—Mark 4:30

If you're writing about a subject for school, you often start with a definition. But in this series I have been writing about the kingdom of God for several weeks, and I haven't given a definition. Why is that?

What do we know about the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is like yeast in a batch of dough, like a hidden treasure, like wheat and weeds growing together, and like a landowner hiring day-laborers. The kingdom of God is unexpected, like a feast with a surprising guest list. Sex workers and other "sinners" enter the kingdom ahead of deeply religious types. And it's really hard for rich people to enter the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God belongs to little children, to peace-makers, and to the poor. The kingdom is something to wait for, something to pray for.

The kingdom of God is in our midst, but it's not from this world. The kingdom is light.

That's a lot to learn about the kingdom of God. And there's more where that came from. But that's not what we would call a definition.

Whatever the kingdom of God is, it gives us a different way to see the world, to see people, and to see God. It also gives us a different way to be in the world. And in some ways that makes us strangers and aliens in the world we know so well.

Jesus, we like to know what we're getting into. So we want to know what your kingdom is all about. But it's all about you, isn't it? Let that be enough for us. Amen.

WHEN THE KINGDOM IS NEAR

"People [won't] say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."
—Luke 17:21

After his baptism, Jesus went around proclaiming the good news. He said, "The kingdom of God is near! It's here! People are entering in front of your eyes!"

Jesus proclaimed the good news by his actions too. He faced down the devil and drove out demons. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He touched the untouchable and taught the unteachable. He welcomed the weary and sent away the smug. He forgave the sinner and challenged the self-righteous. All of it was evidence that the kingdom of God had come.

When Jesus sent out an advance team of seventy-two followers, they healed the sick, like Jesus did. They even drove out demons, like Jesus did (Luke 10:17). Once again, it was evidence that the kingdom of God had come near

(see Luke 9:1-6). Whether people accepted the news or rejected it, the news remained the same: *The kingdom of God has come near!*

Jesus said you can't point to the kingdom of God and say, "There it is!" Not because there's no evidence of the kingdom—but because he wanted us to be alert for signs of the kingdom all around us.

The Michigan state motto says this: *If you seek a pleasant peninsula, look around you.* I wonder what signs of the kingdom are waiting for us to look and to see. I wonder how close those signs are.

Open our eyes, Lord Jesus, to see your kingdom. Surprise us by the wonder of its ways, so different from the ways of this world. Amen.

ADJUSTING THE PICTURE

They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left.
—Mark 15:27

What picture forms in your mind when you think of a king? Maybe it's a handsome man with a golden crown on his head and a jeweled scepter in his hand. Maybe it's someone giving orders while others bow before him and do as he says. Most likely, when we think of a king, the last thing we picture is a cross.

That's why we have to keep reminding ourselves that Jesus is a different kind of king, and that his kingdom is a different kind of kingdom—different from anything the world has ever seen.

James and John still had to learn that. They pictured King Jesus sitting eventually on a gold-plated throne, and they wanted to be sitting right next to him. They wanted the power that comes with proximity—and that showed they didn't understand the glory of

Jesus. They didn't understand the way of his kingdom. Jesus said that the places they wanted were reserved for others. And it turned out that two rebels were crucified on the right and the left of Jesus.

Here's what it adds up to. Forget the gold. King Jesus "sits" on a throne made of two crossed pieces of wood. And his glory is to do the will of God. King Jesus suffers and dies because his kingdom is about mercy and forgiveness rather than about power and conquest. We need to keep adjusting our picture accordingly.

Lord Jesus, you are such a strange king. Your kingdom is strange too. And that's good because it's exactly what this world needs. We need it too. Every day. Amen.

UNDER CAESAR'S NOSE

When the centurion . . . saw how [Jesus] died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"
—Mark 15:39

Paul had been jailed because of false charges from the religious leaders in Jerusalem. So he used his Roman citizenship to appeal his case all the way to the judgment seat of Caesar in Rome (Acts 21-26).

From Egypt to Britain, from Spain to Armenia, the Roman Empire was Caesar's world. Citizens and slaves bowed to him. They feared his armies, which brought him victory. They used his coins, which declared him "the Son of God."

Before the appointment, Paul spent two years under house arrest in Rome. During that time, he welcomed all sorts of visitors. And he spoke boldly about the kingdom of God and the Lord Jesus.

Think about that. In the capital city of Caesar's empire, Paul proclaimed another kingdom and another Lord. Yes, that Lord had died on one of Caesar's crosses.

But to a Roman commander who witnessed that death, it was obvious that Jesus, not Caesar, was "the Son of God."

The kingdom of God, by its very existence, and the Lord Jesus, by his supreme authority, are a direct challenge to every realm and ruler on earth. The law of Christ overrules every contrary human law. And the way of the kingdom sets aside every other way.

Every bit of this is good news. But it's also dangerous news, unwelcome by the powers and authorities of this world. Nevertheless, in Christ we are citizens of his kingdom and under his authority. Even if that means suffering on a cross.

Jesus, we humble ourselves before you. May every realm and every ruler do the same. Amen.

JESUS, REMEMBER ME

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."
—Luke 22:42

While they are dying by crucifixion, one of the two criminals next to Jesus says to him, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus replies, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Have you ever wondered what that's all about?

Originally the word for "paradise" referred to an enclosed garden. Later it meant a place where the righteous dead waited for the resurrection. In the book of Revelation it seems to point to the new Jerusalem and the new creation, where God's people will live with the Lord forever.

In our reading today, what does Jesus mean by "paradise," where the criminal will join him that very day? Does he mean a garden? A waiting room? The New Jerusalem?

Here's what I wonder: what if "paradise" is right there, right then, on those two crosses on that Friday afternoon? I know, it doesn't sound like paradise. And no one would want to vacation there—not to mention living and dying there.

But according to the Bible, when Jesus surrenders his life on the cross—right there, right then—he is in his glory. Right there, right then he is on his throne. Right there, right then he has come into his kingdom, where the Father's will is done on earth, the same as in heaven. And the criminal on the cross nearby is there with him, the first one there with him.

Jesus, I want to be with you in your kingdom. So give me enough faith to take up a cross and to carry it to paradise. Amen.

GOOD NEWS, AND MORE GOOD NEWS

"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God . . . because that is why I was sent."
—Luke 4:43

Here's the good news as I heard it on my way to becoming a Christian: *We're all guilty sinners who deserve to be punished by God. But Jesus suffered the punishment for us when he died on the cross. So if we admit our sin and trust Jesus to deal with it, God forgives us and we are saved.* That really was good news, and I was glad to embrace it.

Here's the good news as Jesus himself announced it on his way through Galilee: "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). Wait a minute. The good news Jesus announced doesn't sound like the good news I heard. How can that be?

It turns out that the good news I heard is just a piece of the good news Jesus announced. We get a glimpse of that in our reading today from Acts 16.

An overwhelmed jailer can't make sense of all the commotion in his jail. So Paul gives him some good news, saying, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." But he doesn't stop there. Because there's more to the good news.

So Paul goes on to teach the jailer and his family about Jesus and, for sure, about the kingdom of God. Because believing in Jesus is incomplete unless we believe what Jesus himself proclaimed.

Jesus, help us to listen to what you say and to watch what you do. How else can we follow you into the kingdom? Amen.

YOUR KINGDOM COME

"The kingdom of God has come upon you."

—Matthew 12:28

When Christians pray the Lord's Prayer, we say, "Your kingdom come." In the long run, we're asking for Jesus to come again and make everything new: heaven and earth, peoples and nations, each one of us. We're asking God to put right everything that is wrong.

The Bible paints some lovely pictures of the kingdom of God in this ultimate sense: the wolf living with the lamb, weapons of war remade into tools of peace, no more death or mourning or crying or pain, justice at last.

But the kingdom of God is not just an ultimate reality in the future. The kingdom of God is also a present reality. It comes near through Jesus Christ, who announces the kingdom of God and makes it real. And it remains near through the Holy Spirit.

So when Christians pray, "Your kingdom come," we're not just asking God to change the world for good. We're asking God to change us too—and to change us now. Because we want to see the kingdom that's already here through Jesus. And we want to participate in that kingdom by the Holy Spirit.

Otherwise we remain captive to kingdoms of this world with their pride and their greed and their hatred and their violence. "Your kingdom come" is our plea that God will free us from all of that—so that we can begin to be new.

Heavenly Father, give us a new way to see the world and a new way to be in the world. Set us free to live as citizens of your kingdom. Amen.

february

Seven Letters to the Church

Evan P. Heerema

The book of Revelation fittingly concludes the Bible. It provides the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the world and of all who believe in him as Lord and King. Revelation presents lots of word pictures that can be surprising and even frightening, but they are meant to encourage followers of Jesus and give them hope. The apocalyptic scenes in Revelation present the victory of Jesus over the forces of evil. Jesus is the risen and reigning Lord!

These devotional readings focus mainly on Revelation 1-3 and are not meant to provide all the answers to questions we might have about these passages. Instead, this series attempts to present the hope we have in Jesus, which the apostle John aimed to share with his original readers in the first century A.D.

The author notes that the following commentaries have been helpful in providing insight for this series of meditations: *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation* by Jeffrey A.D. Weima (Baker Academic, 2021) and *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* by G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015).

Rev. Evan P. Heerema is a retired pastor who loves God and people and knowing that people are growing in their knowledge and hope found in Jesus Christ. He has traveled to Israel and Turkey, where he visited the sites of six of the seven churches that Jesus addresses in Revelation 2-3.

UNVEILING

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

—Revelation 1:1-2

When a curtain is pulled back to reveal a new work of art, the assembled crowd responds with appreciation and applause. Something that was a mystery is made known.

A similar thing happens in the book of Revelation. God pulls back a curtain that has been concealing the finished work of Jesus Christ. Here God reveals to believers in Christ the source of their comfort, courage, and hope. The Lord initially revealed all of this to the apostle John, one of Jesus' closest followers, through the work of an angel. And John testifies that this aligns with what he witnessed firsthand as one of Jesus' disciples.

In chapter one of Revelation, John writes about the Lord of the church of all ages, including

the seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3. And that Lord is Jesus Christ.

This testimony guides us to continue as the church of Jesus today. The church needs to know its Lord and King, who at the same time is Lord and King over this world and all creation.

Rejecting all that contradicts God's Word and God's will, the church must stand for all that is righteous, true, and good. The seven churches in Revelation 2-3 needed that message, and so does the church of Christ in 2024.

King Jesus, you are the Lord of your church and of the whole world. Equip us to follow you. Amen.

GREETING

John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

—Revelation 1:4-5

John is writing a letter, so he begins here with a greeting. Though he is writing to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (present-day Turkey), this letter is not limited to those seven churches. Written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God, this letter is meant for the entire church of Jesus Christ.

The church is made aware of God's grace in Christ to strengthen its faith in times of challenge and hardship, including physical persecution that will come its way. God has provided Jesus as the Savior, "the ruler of the kings of the earth." Knowing this helps us to put all things into perspective as history unfolds.

John greets his readers with grace and peace from the God who is, was, and always

will be—in the name of Jesus, the Christ (Messiah). Jesus is the faithful witness to all that God provides for the church. Jesus alone is the "firstborn from the dead," and he is the exalted King over all kings (see also Colossians 1:15-20; Psalm 89:27), whether they be emperors, monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, CEOs, or chairs of the board.

To Jesus, "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood," belong all glory, power, and praise forever!

Lord and God, thank you for helping us know you as our Savior and King. May we rest in you alone and honor you each day. Amen.

HOPE

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.
—Hebrews 10:23

Hope is not wishful thinking, as we tend to imply when we say things like “I hope it doesn’t rain today,” or “I hope you get a perfect score!” Hope in Christ is founded firmly on the promises of the faithful God who has shown his love for us and calls us to trust that we will live with him forever.

The church of Jesus Christ in the first century A.D. was facing difficult times, and John knew that the hope of Jesus’ followers would be shaken. The writer of Hebrews also indicated that the hope of believers in Christ would be challenged. But in Jesus we have the One on whom our hope can be fixed for all eternity. “Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus . . . let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews

10:19-23). Jesus, who “freed us from our sins by his blood,” calls us to be confident and to hold on with each other in the community of faith as the day of the Lord approaches—when he will come again.

Why do we have such confidence? Because through Jesus’ blood, poured out as payment for our sins, we are forgiven by God, and nothing will ever be able to separate us from his love (Romans 8:39).

Thank you, Jesus, for opening the way to God the Father for us, providing the peace, strength, and confidence we need for each day. Amen.

A KINGDOM AND PRIESTS

To him who . . . has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.
—Revelation 1:5-6

At Mount Sinai the Lord instructed Moses to tell the people of Israel that they were to obey God and keep his covenant and that they would be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Unfortunately, no one was able to keep God’s law perfectly. So eventually God sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to be their substitute, saving them from sin and death. In fact, Jesus came to lay down his life to pay for all human sin. So he is the Savior and Lord of all who trust him in faith (John 3:16-21).

In Revelation 1, John explains that in this way Jesus “made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.” This means that, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are kingdom representatives to the world. We are called to be mediators

(priests) with people by bringing the good news of Jesus and of God’s kingdom to the world, introducing people everywhere to God and his love. Through Jesus, we have unlimited access to God to know him and to be like him. Access to God is no longer limited to a formal earthly priesthood. That access is now open to all who come to faith in Jesus.

“To him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”

In Jesus’ name we serve you, Almighty God. We worship you alone as Lord and serve your world as your representatives, your priests. Equip us with your Spirit for the task you have given us, we pray. Amen.

THE ONE THEY PIERCED

"Look, he is coming with the clouds," and "every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"; and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him." So shall it be! Amen. —Revelation 1:7

Did you notice the quotations in the text of Revelation 1:7? Those phrases come from Old Testament books of prophecy, and John uses them to remind his readers that Jesus' mission was foretold long before he came.

Daniel 7:13-14 gives us a prophetic look at the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) "coming with the clouds of heaven" and taking his place with the "Ancient of Days" (God the Father). The Father gives the Son all authority over a kingdom "that will never be destroyed."

And Zechariah 12:10 speaks of "the one they have pierced" (Jesus—see also Isaiah 53:5; John 19:34). The prophet says that God's people will see what they have done to the Son of Man, and they will mourn because of it. This repentant attitude is a result of God's grace.

And God counts the shed blood of Jesus as the payment for all our sin, even the sins of those who have not yet believed in him. The God who speaks is "the Alpha and the Omega," the one "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Jesus is the Savior and Lord of the church. From his position and authority he leads his church still today. In Christ, the church will stand firm and stand up against its enemies and their threats.

Church of Jesus Christ, stand firm today and always.

Almighty, eternal God, you led the authors of your Word to write history, prophecy, songs, and letters to reveal your love, power, and salvation. Thank you! Amen.

JESUS REVEALED

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

—Revelation 1:9

John explains to his first readers that he understands what it means to suffer for the cause of Christ. He is imprisoned on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

John confirms that anyone who follows Jesus is not excused from persecution. In fact, Jesus told his followers to expect it. As Jesus’ enemies did to him, they will do to his followers (John 15:18-20, 33). But Jesus also rose victorious from death and ascended to the Father’s right hand. And the church will follow. “Patient endurance” is needed through trials and suffering for God’s kingdom while his people live here on earth, but full life with God forever is promised for all who keep serving him.

Next John notes that Jesus announces himself with a trumpet-like voice, telling him to write to the seven churches.

John turns around to see who is speaking, and a man is standing there among seven lampstands, dressed in a royal robe, with hair and eyes reflecting images of the “Ancient of Days” in Daniel 7:9, and with a voice like the sound of rushing waters (see Ezekiel 43:2). This “son of man” can be trusted despite what his enemies might do, for this is Jesus, the Lord of his church!

King Jesus, you have “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18). Give us courage to follow you faithfully each day, with all hope and trust in you. Amen.

“DO NOT BE AFRAID”

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!”

—Revelation 1:17-18

Earlier in his life, John had spent three years with Jesus as a disciple in training. We might expect that John would recognize Jesus, run up to him, and embrace him. But something is clearly different about Jesus. The glorious presentation of the Son of Man so overwhelms John that he falls at Jesus' fiery-bronze feet as though dead. But then he hears the familiar words of his Lord and Master: “Do not be afraid.” The loving Savior speaks comfort and assurance.

Jesus gives John an elaborate description of himself. What a way to build up John's confidence and that of the churches! Jesus is the “First and the Last,” the “Living One,” who “was dead” but is “alive for ever and ever!” And there's more: Jesus holds the keys to death and

Hades, so they have no power over him or his followers.

Jesus then commands John to write to the seven churches that are represented by the lampstands. (And, to us today, those churches represent the whole church of Christ.) By sharing what he has “seen, what is now and what will take place later,” John will describe how Jesus is the reigning Lord of heaven and earth. Despite the churches' strengths and weaknesses, Jesus is God. The powers of darkness will do their worst to destroy the church, but they will fail because Jesus is the living Lord.

Almighty King, you are the victor over death and the grave. Drive out our fear today. Amen.

TO THE CHURCH IN EPHEBUS

"You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary."
—Revelation 2:3

On a trip to Ephesus, I was able to walk through what had once been a neighborhood of houses and streets. Etched into a stone in front of one doorway was a symbol that looked like a fish. According to tradition, this may have identified the house as a place where Christians lived and met together for worship, prayer, and fellowship.

In Revelation 2, Jesus tells John to write to the church in Ephesus, saying, "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. . . . You have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." Jesus' followers in Ephesus are commended for holding up the light of Christ against the darkness of this world.

The apostle Paul had earlier reminded the Ephesians, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). Still today, the devil aims to harm the church until Jesus returns.

Jesus commended the church in Ephesus for standing strong in defense of the gospel. God's Word to us today remains: Be strong, know the difference between light and darkness, be wise and ready to "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Ephesians 4:1).

Lord Jesus, strengthen us to serve you faithfully, shining your light into this world. Amen.

A SEVERE WARNING

"Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

—Revelation 2:5

The Lord Jesus has the authority to reveal the truth and call his people to repentance. He stands among his churches (including us!) with power, authority, and love.

After commending the Ephesian church on their hard work and perseverance, Jesus says, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first."

Paul had mentioned that love in his letter to the Ephesians: "Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you" (Ephesians 1:15). The Ephesians had loved one another, striving for unity in the faith.

Now, however, Jesus reprimands them for forsaking that love, giving up on their commitment to show the love of Christ to everyone. Had they

become selfish, proud, unwilling to do what was needed to get along with each other and with others? Had they become so absorbed with right thinking that they had allowed clouds of selfishness to come between them?

Jesus graciously calls them to repent and turn back to the love they had lost.

Friends, Jesus calls us to love one another and all people. Loving one another as Jesus has loved us is still the rallying cry of the church. Without sacrificial love between believers, any attempt at testifying to God's love to others will appear shallow and be a sham.

Lord, help us to show your love for your sake, that you may be known to the world. Amen.

VICTORY!

"To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." —Revelation 2:7

To live in Ephesus meant being surrounded by the worship of false gods. The temple to Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple of the Roman emperor Domitian dominated the central part of the city. How was a follower of Jesus to live in a culture that idolized power and false gods and encouraged sexual immorality?

Jesus had told the Ephesian Christians, "Consider how far you have fallen." In other words, remember what you once had and did and enjoyed with your Lord and Savior.

Jesus called them to repent of their sin, to allow the Spirit of God to soften their hardened hearts and give them a restored heart of love. Then he urged them to "do the things [they] did at first." In other words, persevere, hold on to

the truth, and show love and compassion to one another.

Otherwise, said Jesus, he would remove their lampstand. The Ephesian church would no longer exist. He would do that for the honor of his name.

However, if they would repent and be restored to him, they would be victorious and be able to eat from the tree of life. This promise of Jesus looks forward to his return and the establishment of the new heavens and new earth, eternal life in the paradise of God. The tree of life awaits all who profess faith in Jesus Christ alone, live for him, and share his love with everyone. Come, Lord Jesus.

Almighty God, help me to love you above all, and others as myself. For your glory, Amen.

TO SMYRNA

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."
—Revelation 2:10

To the family of God, near and far, young and old, rich and poor, Jesus speaks as "the First and the Last, who died and came to life again."

Jesus presents himself to the church in Smyrna as divine and sovereign, being over all history—past, present, and future. As the First and the Last, he covers not only the ends of the spectrum but also everything in between.

Even death could not hold Jesus; he is alive! All who believe that Jesus suffered and died for them can find comfort in knowing that death will not hold them either. In Jesus, like Jesus, we will be raised to new life. In Jesus we have assurance that we will live forever with him.

With this truth Jesus encouraged and strengthened our brothers and sisters in Smyrna. He went on to mention their

afflictions and their poverty. He knew they were slandered by people who said they followed God but did not. Those people were agents of Satan, he said. Jesus called his true followers not to be afraid of any suffering or persecution they would face. "Be faithful, even to the point of death," he said. He had already been there for them. The One who is First and Last would hold them through all that would come their way.

This same Jesus will also be with us through the difficulties we face. Jesus is the One who gives life and victory, now and forever.

Thank you, Jesus, for dying and coming to life again for us. In you we can be assured that nothing will ever separate us from your love. Amen.

LOOKING BEYOND PERSECUTION

"Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer."

—Revelation 2:10

If I had the privilege of being with Jesus throughout his ministry years, I would have been on the lookout for enemies or traps. He told his disciples, "If they persecuted me [and they did], they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Like John, Peter had heard Jesus say this, and he wrote about suffering "grief in all kinds of trials" because of belief in Christ. Yet, despite those trials, followers of Jesus would experience victory.

Because of Jesus' resurrection, all who believe in him have "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." This reality helps to form the foundation of our faith. The knowledge of our eternal inheritance with God outshines the suffering and grief caused by trials and persecutions that we might face in this life.

Peter also says that the trials we can face will prove the genuineness of our faith, the effectiveness of the gospel, and the truth of the written and spoken Word.

The church at Smyrna heard the word about persecution and the subsequent promised victory. Persecution would not be the end.

Since Jesus is God's promised Messiah to the world, we can boldly proclaim him to all who will listen.

Lord, we worship you as the resurrected, victorious One. Your victory guarantees that all who believe in you will also be victorious. Fill us with joy in the salvation we have already received in you. Amen.

A HEALTHY CHURCH'S TROUBLES

Paul devoted himself . . . to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. But when they . . . became abusive, he . . . said . . . "From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

—Acts 18:5-6

The apostle Paul had become God's "chosen instrument to proclaim [Jesus'] name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). As Paul ministered across Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, his method was to go first to Jewish synagogues and then to the Gentiles, sharing the good news of Jesus. Acts 18:1-8 describes Paul's ministry in Corinth.

Some of the Jewish people there believed the gospel, but others "opposed Paul and became abusive." So Paul shook out his clothes in protest and moved along, saying he would go and preach to the Gentiles.

In Smyrna a similar situation developed. The church of Jesus was being persecuted by people who said they were Jews, God's original chosen people,

but they were being influenced by Satan.

Though Jesus' church there was healthy, it faced troubles. Jesus said he knew the people's affliction and suffering for being his followers. He also knew their poverty. In the bustling city of Smyrna business thrived, but unless you offered incense to the city's gods, you could not do business there. Without an income, you became poor. Yet Jesus said they were rich! The kingdom of God operates on a different scale: amazing grace!

Friends, be strong in Jesus. All who are children of God in Christ will wear the victor's crown.

Faithful Father, help us to be strong in testifying to your great faithfulness and love. Amen.

TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM

"These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name."
—Revelation 2:12-13

The city of Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province of Asia (present-day Turkey). The Roman ruler there held the power of the sword; at his decision someone could immediately be put to death. So in that setting Jesus, "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Revelation 1:5), with "the sharp, double-edged sword" of his mouth (1:16; 2:12), claimed ultimate authority over eternal life and death.

Jesus commends the church for "remaining true to [his] name" and staying in Pergamum. They took up permanent residence in this city filled with pagan temples and idol worship. They became rooted in the Pergamum community and built up the church in a most difficult location, where Satan lived and reigned.

Jesus had previously taught his followers to do this: "On this rock [the so-called 'gates of Hades' at Caesarea Philippi in northern Galilee] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16:18). Similarly Jesus is saying, "In Pergamum I will build my church, and the throne of Satan will not overcome it."

Satan will never overcome a faithful community of Jesus-followers. Trust the One who is Judge to keep his word on your behalf. Be humble, be obedient, be strong.

King of kings, Lord of lords, guide us to follow you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Open doors to your Word, and empower us to share it. Amen.

A FEW THINGS

"I have a few things against you. . . Repent therefore!"

—Revelation 2:14-16

Many of the Christians in Pergamum remained true to Jesus. That would not have been easy. An altar to Zeus stood near the tip of the city's mountaintop, in the shadow of a temple built by the emperor Trajan. Below stood a "healing center" dedicated to the god Asclepius. And the worship of Dionysus led to sexual perversions in pagan worship.

Jesus commended his followers for remaining true to him. "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you," he said. Some people in the church were trying to mix their faith in Jesus with pagan practices. Those practices included worship "parties" where food was offered to idols and people engaged in drunkenness and sexual perversions. And Jesus does not put up with that.

Many years earlier, Balaam, a false prophet, had set up a plan

to tempt the men of Israel to similar perversions (Numbers 25:1-3; 31:16). Jesus also mentioned the Nicolaitans (see Rev. 2:6), who seem to have wanted Christ's followers to compromise their beliefs. But any compromise would oppose a wholehearted commitment to Jesus.

So the church was to call its members to repent, said Jesus, or he would come "and fight against them with the sword of [his] mouth." This meant he would bring his Word of judgment against them.

This warning remains for all of us today. Let us take note, repent, and submit to Jesus.

Lord Jesus, help us to follow you wholeheartedly. We confess our sins and repent, knowing you are faithful to forgive. Amen.

REWARDS FOLLOW REPENTANCE

"To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it."

—Revelation 2:17

Jesus called the Pergamum church, some of whom were slipping into idolatry and immorality, to repent. Otherwise, judgment would come.

But to all who would repent, to those who were eager to commit to Jesus, there would be victory. He would give them "some of the hidden manna," he said. This refers back to God's Old Testament people receiving a daily supply of manna for their food (Exodus 16). God sustained them in the desert with this "bread from heaven" as a sign of his love. Jesus built on that connection by announcing that he is the true bread from heaven who gives life to the world. All who come to Jesus in faith will receive bread that feeds the soul. Jesus, the bread of life, opens the door to eternal life (John 6:32-51).

Jesus also said that each repentant believer would receive "a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it." We aren't sure what this means, but it seems related to having a new relationship with God in Christ and a new character that is treasured deep within one's heart. (See also some passages about names in Isaiah 43:1; 62:2-4, 12; Revelation 3:12; 19:11-16.)

Though some details here are mysterious, the message is clear: Jesus calls us to live faithfully for him, and he promises eternal life to all who fully believe and trust in him.

Lord Jesus, reign over our hearts as we live for you in this world. We trust in you for eternal life. Amen.

THYATIRA

"These are the words of the Son of God. . . ."

—Revelation 2:18

To the church in Thyatira, Jesus reveals himself as "the Son of God." This is the first time we find this name for Jesus in the book of Revelation. Jesus also connects this name to the one "whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (see Revelation 1:14-15).

In many cities like Thyatira in the Roman Empire, emperor worship and idol worship were impossible to miss. But if you worshiped the true Son of God, Jesus Christ, you could walk and move about with confidence amid the idol temples and altars. You could do that even if it meant you would be ostracized from the business world, rejected in your neighborhood, and perhaps beaten and put into jail or even put to death.

John had been an eyewitness at the transfiguration of

Jesus, and he had heard the voice from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). John knew Jesus, and now Jesus presents himself as that same Son of God to the church in Thyatira.

Do you know Jesus? Who is he to you? A good teacher, a miracle worker from storybooks? Or do you know him as the only Son of God who came to this world to provide salvation and to rule as King over all earthly kings and rulers? Jesus is the living and reigning Son of God whose eyes penetrate to the heart and whose feet stomp out injustice. Let us join with all true believers to worship him!

Son of God, to you belong all praise, honor, and glory, for ever and ever. Amen!

ALIVE FOR GOOD WORKS

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

—Revelation 2:19

The Son of God, with blazing eyes and feet like burnished bronze, knows the deeds, love, and faith of the Thyatira church. They were living as God's handiwork, doing good work that God had prepared in advance for them to do (see Ephesians 2:10). They had been saved by God's grace to bring grace to a dying world.

The church of the living God is honored to continue to live in Jesus, in this world, by doing good works that share the love of God with others.

The deeds of the Thyatira church shone like stars in the darkness. They loved God above all, and they practiced love for one another. They cared, they encouraged, they supported, they shared. They believed what was true, and they stood strong in their faith in Christ. When misleading

words were spoken, they resisted the temptation to be led astray and wander from the light of Jesus into darkness.

They were faithful and loving in their service to others in Jesus' name, and they persevered. They did not back down. Empowered by the Spirit of God, they stood firm on their foundation of faith in the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Persevering service is meant to be a hallmark of the church. What works of love and faith can Jesus highlight in your life and in your church?

Thank you, Lord, for preparing us to serve you and others. We would not choose that on our own, but, by your Spirit, we can persevere. To you be all glory! Amen.

ANOTHER JEZEBEL

"You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet . . . [and] misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols."

—Revelation 2:20

Yesterday we marveled at the grace-filled good deeds of the church in Thyatira. Jesus also saw that they "were doing more than [they] did at first." They were improving and growing in good deeds.

"Nevertheless, I have this against you," he said. Some people in the church were tolerating a "Jezebel" who called herself a prophet but taught the seductive practices of idol-worship feasts and orgies. Jesus compared her to Queen Jezebel in ancient Israel (see 1 Kings 16:29-33; 21:5-26).

Jesus was patient, giving her time to "repent of her immorality, but she [was] unwilling." So he would bring punishment, urging those who followed her to repent as well. The Jezebel of the Old Testament received a cruel and ugly death (2 Kings 9:30-37). It seems that this

false prophet in Thyatira—and those who followed her—would receive a horrible death too.

All this would happen because of a refusal to accept God's grace and turn around (repent) to live by God's way of blessing and life to the full.

Jesus promised, though, that all who repented and did not follow such ways would be victorious, able to reign with Jesus and receive the morning star (see also Rev. 22:16).

May we all search our hearts and listen, repenting while we have time to turn and follow the Lord into real, full life.

Thank you, Lord, for your mercy. You are good and gracious. By your Spirit, guide us to follow you. Amen.

SARDIS

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

As a youngster, I often played a game with my friends called "King of the Mountain." All we needed was a mound of dirt. One of us would declare ourselves king of the dirt pile and defeat all who would try to dethrone us. Of course, the king needed to watch all sides for a sneak attack.

The city of Sardis had a citadel on top of a mountain. The residents considered themselves safe from all enemies. But they became complacent and lazy about defense, and the city was captured.

The church at Sardis had apparently followed a similar path. Prone to laziness in their spiritual life, the church was headed for destruction. Jesus knew their deeds and was not impressed. Though they had a reputation of being alive and healthy, the Lord of the church

saw the truth and said, "You are dead." Ouch!

Even so, Jesus graciously urged them to remember what they had received and heard. Calling them to repent, he gave them hope.

Do you and your church need to remember what you have received and heard? Are you spiritually alert to dangers both within and outside the church? Are people's lives being changed so that they are growing closer and closer to Jesus? If not, what does Jesus tell you to do?

Lord of the church, help us to follow you faithfully, not growing lazy in our service but always growing closer to you. In your name we pray. Amen.

HOPE FOR SARDIS

"I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. . . . Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken. . . ." —Ezekiel 37:14

Ezekiel's prophecy about dry bones being restored to life is a startling picture of hope in the darkest of circumstances. When God speaks life into what is dead, resurrection happens.

Jesus had told the Sardis church, "You are dead." But he didn't stop there. He called them to "Wake up!" His power could strengthen what life remained in them, giving them hope.

Jesus called them to remember what they had received and heard. Memory itself is a gift from God to cherish. May the church never lose its memory of God's great gifts.

Then "hold . . . fast" to what you were given, he said. In other words, obey and be on guard and on high alert. Watch, and watch out!

And "repent." Confession is good and necessary for the

soul. Repentance and the forgiveness that follows are so freeing to our souls. In repentance we can admit who we are before God. And God mercifully forgives because he loves us and wants us to live with him.

The Lord wants us all to wake up and be fully alive, flourishing as he created us to be, and sharing his goodness with others everywhere in this broken world.

Father, I have sinned against you. I have not loved you with my whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. I need to be made right with you, remembering what you have given and done for me through Jesus. Fill me and renew my life, in Jesus' name. Amen.

WHITE CLOTHES

"Yet you have a few people . . . who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy."

—Revelation 3:4

White shirts with ties and hats used to be the standard wear of male baseball fans (most of whom were playing hooky from their work at the office). White shirts and ties were also standard for many males who attended church (that really cramped my style as a young boy).

But white robes will be the clothes of grace when the multitude that no one can count stands before the throne of God and the Lamb in heaven (Revelation 7:9).

In Sardis, Jesus said, there were yet a few people who had "not soiled their clothes"—and they would be walking with him, rewarded for their faithful service.

And not only will these believers be with Jesus, but their names are written in the book of life.

Written in the Lamb's book of life (see Revelation 21:27),

our names will never be blotted out. The atonement sealed by Jesus through his one sacrifice for all is satisfactory before God forever.

And the victory will come when we wake up, strengthen, remember, hold fast, and repent.

God our Father desires that we be with him and walk with Jesus forever.

Are you awake, remembering, repentant, and ready to wear the white robe prepared for you in Christ?

Lord and Savior, when temptations come our way, give us courage and strength to resist. Keep us walking in step with you, alert and faithful for your sake. Amen.

WELCOME TO PHILADELPHIA

"These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David."
—Revelation 3:7

The church in Philadelphia is one of two churches that do not receive a complaint from Jesus (the other is Smyrna). What a compliment from "him who is holy and true"!

Imagine what it was like for the church in Philadelphia to be greeted this way. The One who is holy and true is wholly set apart from all that is worldly. Everything that Jesus says and does is holy and true, both now and forevermore. This reminds me of the inspiring hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!" based on Isaiah 6:1-3, Revelation 4:1-11, and other passages in Scripture.

Jesus also says that he "holds the key of David." In Isaiah 22:20-22 we find some background on this phrase. The one who holds this key can open and close the door of the house of David. (This prob-

ably refers to the kingdom that God promises to establish forever in Christ, a descendant of David—see 2 Samuel 7:11-16; Matthew 1:1; Revelation 22:16.) And when he opens or shuts the door, it is permanently open or shut.

When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain in the temple in Jerusalem "was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mark 15:38). God did that, opening the way into his presence through the death of Jesus for all who trust in him as Savior. Jesus has opened the way to his kingdom. Will you enter in?

Holy Spirit, open our hearts to your truth, the story of God's love. Fill us with wonder and awe, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

“YOU HAVE LITTLE STRENGTH, YET . . .”

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

I love passages in the Bible that show how Jesus welcomed children, blessed them, and urged his followers to come to him with childlike faith. Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Jesus expects us to be as trusting as children.

David wrote in Psalm 34, “This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles,” and “Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD” (vv. 6, 11).

The Philadelphia church had little strength. They had little power to make their presence felt. They were a small group of people without a lot of movers and shakers. But what they had was a deep and abiding faith, like that of little children. They trusted Jesus despite the lies told

by local synagogue members. And although they couldn’t do much against those adversaries, they could believe in Jesus.

To this church Jesus pointed out the open door to the kingdom of heaven. He had lovingly opened that door by his death and resurrection, and they had entered through faith. They had kept his word and had not denied his name.

A child with faith willingly makes childlike but confident assertions about Jesus. Let’s remember that we are God’s children, whom he loves, and that we can trust him with childlike faith.

Lord, teach us to be like little children who believe with awe and wonder. Help us to trust you fully and completely. Amen.

BE THE CHURCH

"I will also write on them my new name."

—Revelation 3:12

Rebranding often refers to re-naming a business or institution and updating its logo and communication materials.

The church in Philadelphia was going to be rebranded, receiving a new name. They had been given an open door that no one could shut; they were recognized as true citizens of the kingdom of God. People who tried to discourage and persecute them would recognize that the love of God was directed toward all who believed in Jesus as Savior and Messiah. The resurrected Jesus was now the way to full life through faith.

The Philadelphia church would also be protected by Jesus through a time of great trial. And Jesus does not say he would take them out of the trial but would protect them through it.

As they held on to Jesus' promises, the Philadelphia church

would become like "a pillar in the temple of God," a permanent part of God's presence in the world. On them would be written the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem, God's city, and Jesus' new name (this may refer to Revelation 19:11-16). They would be rebranded to show that they belonged to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

"Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says." Childlike faith and perseverance in the name of the One "who is holy and true," even through persecution, will result in citizenship in the eternal kingdom of God.

Loving God, may we trust in you for all things, at all times, in every way. Strengthen our resolve to be your family. Amen.

LUKEWARM LAODICEA

"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."

—Revelation 3:15-16

Jesus' letter to the church at Laodicea is striking. He has nothing positive to say about this church. But he does graciously warn them and call them to repentance, saying, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline."

Here Jesus names himself the "Amen," which means, "So be it" or, in other words, "This is the truth." Jesus is the true One, and what he says is trustworthy and true. When he speaks, so be it. He is "the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation."

Jesus rebukes the Laodicean church for its ineffective ministry. The cold mountain water of Colossae, 10 miles away, and the hot mineral water of Hierapolis, six miles away, both served people well. Cold water refreshes, and hot water

heals. But Laodicea did not have a natural water source, so when either the cold or hot water made it to them, it was lukewarm and not beneficial. Jesus uses this local situation to describe the ministry of the church. It neither refreshed nor healed; it was putrid. Jesus wished for this church to be either refreshing or therapeutic so that their ministry would be effective. These words were harsh but needed.

The Spirit calls us to search our hearts too. Does Jesus' rebuke apply to us in our churches today? Have we become lukewarm? Do we rely on wealth instead of the Lord?

Lord Jesus, fill us with your Spirit of truth. Forgive and renew us, we pray. Amen.

RICH BUT, OH, SO POOR

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

—Hebrews 13:5

Stock market values can make people wealthy or poor. Money is not a good god; it cannot love you, nor can it give you eternal life. The one true God, however, has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

The church in Laodicea had a big problem. Because their lukewarm attitude caused a less than effective ministry, Jesus warned them that he was about to spit them out of his mouth.

They had bank accounts filled with money, tempting their eyes to turn from Jesus toward only themselves. But that made them "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" in Jesus' eyes.

Jesus did not shut the door on them, but he offered wise financial advice. He advised them to find true wealth in him, and to obtain the pure,

white garments of his righteousness rather than the black-wool garments that Laodicea was famous for. And they should invest in the eye medicine of his insight, rather than the medicinal balm their region was known for.

Money itself is not the problem, but trusting in money instead of Jesus will bring ruin (see 1 Timothy 6:10). Following the way of Laodicea puts the church at great spiritual risk. Let us thank God that he never leaves us but is always ready to discipline us in love.

Lord and God, rich in grace and mercy, shield us from trusting in money and wealth. Turn our eyes to Jesus, and fill us with your glory and grace. Amen.

KNOCK, KNOCK!

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

—Revelation 3:20

Knock, knock jokes can be fun and amusing—and yet some can induce groans. But Jesus' knock at the door in his letter to Laodicea was no joke.

As we have learned, the Laodiceans were so bad off that Jesus threatened to spit them out of his mouth. But he also graciously knocks, wanting to provide forgiveness and to join with his followers in the banquet prepared for everyone in God's eternal kingdom.

This invitation has continued throughout history. Believers who respond are sinners saved by God's amazing grace, restored and revived through Jesus. He is at the right hand of God the Father, who is, and was, and always will be. We can find comfort in this today and tomorrow and forever.

As Jesus explained, he rebukes and disciplines those whom

he loves. When you sense his love toward you, he is knocking at your door, calling for repentance and offering real, full life. Do not wait or be slow to remember. Repent and obey.

The repentant person is met by the presence of Jesus, "the Amen, the faithful and true witness," standing at the door of their heart, awaiting their response. When his call is received by a repentant heart, Jesus promises to come in and eat with that person, enjoying the kingdom banquet. The scene is that of victory, salvation, and full life with the Lord of lords and King of kings. No joke!

Loving Savior, thank you for coming not only to invite me to your banquet but also to lay down your life to pay for my sin. Help me to live faithfully for you. Amen.

TAKE THESE WORDS TO HEART

"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done."

—Revelation 22:12-13

The closing words of Revelation 22 provide a fitting conclusion to our study of Jesus' letters to the churches—and all of this applies to his worldwide church today.

The churches in Revelation 2-3 were praised according to their faithfulness, and they were challenged to continue in spite of opposition and persecution to the point of death.

Here Jesus blesses his followers and urges them to await his glorious return. "Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done."

The Revelation of Jesus Christ has been given to supply the church with courage and hope, grounded in the One who is the Son of God. He gave his lifeblood as payment for our sin, and he is the Son of Man

who sits at the right hand of God the Father, reigning over the church and ruling over all the kings of the earth. Jesus is Lord over all. Nothing has happened or will happen apart from his rule. The church, by faith in Jesus Christ, will gather at the banquet of the kingdom and will live forever with him in the new heaven and new earth.

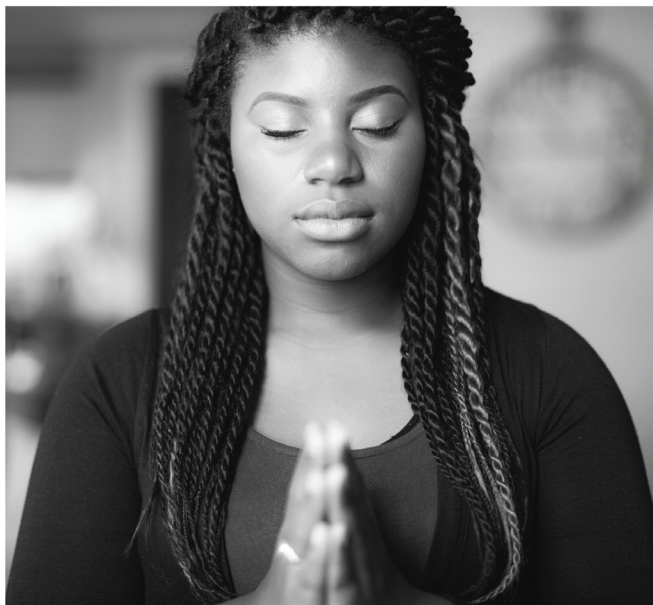
"He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

Lord Jesus, thank you for your letters to the churches, encouraging us and giving us hope, calling us to repent, serve, and stand strong in you. Guide us into your future for your church today. Amen.

NOTES

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