

# Small Group Leaders Pit Stop

## An Introduction To Revelation 1-3

### Who?

1:1-2

**In Groups: Fill in the chain from 1:1-2**

God the Father -----> Jesus Christ -----> Angel -----> John ---> Servants/ 7 churches



### Where?

1:9-11

Show map on screen. Patmos was a prison island in Mediterranean. 7 churches in western Turkey, Ephesus is the big city.

### When?

1:9, 2:8-10, 2:13

It's a time of persecution. 2 Possible periods in the 1st century. Either late 60s just before the fall of Jerusalem when Christians were being persecuted under Nero. Or it could be in the mid90s when Christians were persecuted under Emperor Domitian. Balance is probably for the 90s but either way the big point is that it's a time when Christians are facing slander, hostility and persecution.

### What?

**In Groups:**

**1. Go through ch1 and look for everything we are told about God and Jesus?**

*God*

- *Eternal - 1:4*
- *Alpha and Omega - 1:8*

*Jesus*

- *Faithful witness - 1:5*
- *Firstborn from among the dead - 1:5*
- *Ruler of the kings of the earth - 1:5*
- *Loves us - 1:5*
- *Freed us by his blood - 1:5*
- *Has made us a kingdom and priests to serve God - 1:6*
- *Deserving of all glory and power - 1:6*
- *Will come again in judgment - 1:7.*
- *Voice like a trumpet/ rushing waters - 1:10, 1:15*

- *Son of Man - 1:12*
- *With his people - 1:12*
- *Robe and sash - priest - 1:13*
- *Hair white like wool - purity - 1:14*
- *All seeing eyes - 1:14*
- *Feet like bronze - purity - 1:15*
- *Holds churches - 1:16*
- *Sharp sword/words - 1:16*
- *Face shining like sun - power, beauty, purity - 1:16.*
- *First and last - 1:17*
- *Living One, was dead, now alive - 1:18*
- *Holds keys of death and hades - 1:18.*

## **2. What is the big message in ch1?**

Big simple Message of chapter 1 and the of the whole book is that **King Jesus wins!** He's the king, he's in charge, he's the victor so he calls his people to patiently endure --> **See 1:9 - Suffering - Kingdom - Patient Endurance. You are suffering - but you're in the Kingdom because Jesus has won the victory at the cross - so patiently endure!**

### **How?**

- Chapter 1 is a Prologue to the whole book

In John's gospel ch1 sums up the message of the whole book and it's the same here in Revelation. In ch1 John gives us the melody that's going to go throughout the book.

- The Old Testament is Key to the Imagery

*e.g. Lampstands - 1:12 --> Zechariah 4:2-6. Son of Man - 1:13 --> Daniel 7, 10.*

Lampstands - in Zech 4 they represent the temple and the faithful people of Israel. Son of Man - doesn't really make sense without Daniel 7, 10 and also Jesus' use of the phrase to describe himself in the gospels.

Daniel 10 - see the similarities in how the two are described.

*e.g. of football language - If I tell you that the Owls beat the Seagulls a few weeks ago you might think that I'm into some sort of horrible animal fighting sport. But if you know football then you'll know that I'm simply saying that Sheffield Wednesday beat Brighton. You need to know the language of football to know what I'm talking about. In the same way if we're going to start to understand the imagery of Revelation then we need to know the language and imagery of the OT.*

- The Letters follow the same basic structure (see table)

Get them to work through the table - 1 group per letter.

- The Letters are linked to ch1

*See 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14.*

- The Letters are linked to the rest of Revelation

*See 2:7, 11, 26-27; 3:5, 21, 21.*

*2:7--> 22:2*

### **So What?**

***In Groups: Take the big message of Revelation and think about how it applies to;***

- ***People in your group?***
- ***Christians in Britain today?***
- ***Christians in Iraq?***

#### Recommended Books

Revelation Unwrapped by John Richardson

What Christ thinks of the Church - An Exposition of Revelation 1-3 by John Stott

Revelation by Leon Morris

The Message of Revelation by Michael Wilcox

## Revelation 1:1-8

### Context

- *Historical Context*
  - Revelation was written at a time when Christians were being persecuted and imprisoned for the gospel (1:9, 2:9, 2:13, 6:9-10.) (See the introduction to Revelation for more details on the historical context.)
  - It is also a time when false teachers are leading God's people astray (2:14-16, 2:20-23) and some churches are beginning to lose their focus and zeal (2:4-5, 3:15-18.)
- *Chapter 1 - The Prologue to the whole book*
  - In John's Gospel chapter 1 introduces us to many of the big themes of the book and the same is true of Revelation. In chapter 1 we learn that God is eternal (1:4, 8) and that Jesus is the risen and victorious king (1:5) who will return in judgment (1:7.) These themes will be developed and expanded throughout the rest of the letter.
  - It is also worth noting how many of the themes and phrases found in 1:1-9 are repeated in 22:6-21. John does this to emphasise the trustworthiness of what he has written (1:1-3 and 22:6), Jesus' coming (1:7 and 22:7, 17, 20) and therefore how it is worth taking to heart and living in the light of what we are told in Revelation (1:3 and 22:7, 14-15, 18-19.)
- *Chapters 1-3*
  - Many of the things we are told about Jesus in chapter 1 are repeated and applied to the different churches in their different situations. For example in 1:16 we are told that Jesus' words are like a sharp double-edged sword and in 2:16 the church at Pergamum is reminded of this and the false teachers there are warned that if they do not repent then Jesus will come and fight against them with the sword of his mouth (i.e. his word.)
  - Similarly in chapter 1 we are told that Jesus is the first and last who died and rose from the dead (see 1:5, 17-18.) In chapter 2 Jesus encourages the church at Smyrna with this truth as they face slander, suffering and imprisonment (see 2:8-11.)

### Structure

- **v1-3 - Take To Heart What Jesus Is Revealing To Us**
  - **Revelation** - The book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) is just that - a revelation. The greek word apocalypsis from which we get the english words Revelation and Apocalypse simply means "to unveil/reveal." This means that what we have in this book is an unveiling, a revealing, a pulling back of the curtain to show us how things really are. In the book of Revelation God is pulling back the curtain and showing us reality. He is not just revealing the future and Christ's second coming to us. He is primarily showing us how things really are now. God wants to lift our eyes up from the struggles of this world to remind us of how things really are. It can often feel like things are out of control, and that evil is winning, but in Revelation God is revealing to us that Jesus really is the victorious king.
  - **Reliability** - In v1-2 we are given the chain down which the revelation has passed - God --> Jesus Christ --> Angel --> John --> Servants (Christians). This chain is really important because it reassures us that we can trust what we are reading in Revelation. There are lots of strange and difficult things in this book which we might

be tempted to dismiss or ignore. John wants us to see that this book is not just human wisdom, instead it is all divine revelation and so we can trust it all.

- **Blessing** - In v3 we are given the big application of the whole book. We are to "take to heart what is written" and if we do this we will be blessed. There are two reasons why we are to do this and why it will result in blessing. Firstly we are to take it to heart "because the time is near" (v3 - see below for more details on this.) Secondly if we take Revelation to heart we will be blessed because of where this Revelation comes from - God. Here is God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come," the "Alpha and Omega" revealing reality to us, so no wonder if we take it to heart we will be blessed.
- **v4-8 - Jesus Is The Rescuing, Risen and Returning King**
  - Standard Trinitarian Greeting - It is easy to forget that Revelation is a letter to seven churches. As a result John starts his letter with something of a standard Trinitarian greeting in v4-5. Notice how John conveys Grace and Peace to the churches from the whole Trinity; Father, Spirit and Son. (See under Tricky Bits for why the seven spirits are indeed the Holy Spirit.) We have just been told that we will be blessed if we take to heart what is being revealed to us so let's notice what we are being told about each person of the Trinity.
  - **God the Father**
    - Twice we are told that he is eternal (v4 and v8.) As the creator of time God has to be outside of time, and bigger than time. As we take this to heart this immediately puts all the opposition, slander, persecution and difficulties that we face in this life in perspective. As bad as all those things are, they are only temporary, they have a beginning and an end. In contrast, our God is the eternal God who has no beginning and end. Nothing we face is too big for him.
    - Notice that we are also told that he is on the throne in v4. The throne of the universe is not empty, nor is there a fight between God and Satan for the throne. The eternal God is on the throne. He always has been and he always will be!
    - I know you are preparing a Bible study but why not stop for five minutes and take to heart these simple yet mind-blowing truths that we have just seen about the Father. Praise him for who he is.
  - **The Holy Spirit**
    - The Spirit is before the throne and according to Greg Beale this "highlights its role as an emissary to carry out the bidding of God (4:5) and Christ (5:6) on behalf of [Christians]." The Spirit is the one who takes God's grace and peace and applies it personally to us as Christians living in this fallen and often difficult world.
  - **Jesus Christ**
    - In v5 we are taken through three stages of Christ's role. First, he was the faithful witness to the Father even in the face of death. In this respect he is our example and encouragement as he calls us to be a kingdom of priests (v6) who witness to and serve him in a hostile world. Second, he is the firstborn from the dead (see also 1:18). This is a big theme in Revelation and reminds us of Jesus' victory at the cross. Jesus has won the victory, sin and death have been defeated and so the result is not in doubt. One day sin and death will be completely destroyed. Furthermore as the *firstborn* from among the dead we are reminded that Jesus' people will follow him through death and into life with him in the new creation. Again just stop and take this to heart. Think about what this means to Christians who face

death for their faith. Think about what a great encouragement this would be to them. Think about how it encourages you in the trials that you face. Take a moment to praise God that Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead. Thirdly, notice that in v5 Jesus is the king of all the kings of the earth. Again this would have been a powerful encouragement to the first readers who were probably facing persecution from the Roman Empire. Jesus is bigger and stronger than the Emperor, and v7 he will come again in power, victory and judgment. Here is the one to serve!

- **The Church - Notice too what we are told about us.**
  - First we are loved by Jesus and he has demonstrated his love for us by setting us free from our sins by his blood. Here is truly costly love. What is more he has demonstrated his love for us by making us a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father. This picks up Old Testament language used to describe Israel. In effect it is saying that the church is the people of God and that as the people of God we are called to serve God in his world. As Priests we are to speak to God on behalf of the world but we are also to speak to the world on behalf of God. This will not be easy, and will no doubt result in hostility, slander and persecution so, like some of the Seven Churches, we might be tempted to give up. Instead we need to take to heart what we have seen already in chapter 1. God is the eternal king, Jesus is the risen and returning King who has rescued us and made us his people! Let's take this to heart and commit ourselves to the King's service.

### Tricky Bits

- ***What is meant by "Soon to take place" (v1) and "time is near" (v3)?***
  - This is not easy and the commentators spend ages debating exactly what this means. The big thing to remember with Revelation is that it is not just about Jesus' Second Coming. Instead Revelation is about the whole of human history from Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension to Jesus' Coming Again. This period of history is known in the Bible as The Last Days (see Acts 2:17 for an example of this.) As a result, we, like John and his readers are living in The Last Days.
  - Both of these phrases pick up language used in Daniel 2 where we are told that Christ's kingdom will be established in the last days.
  - At this point it is worth quoting Wilcox at length;
    - "And now John has seen the latter days arrive. The setting up of God's kingdom has begun with the coming of Christ; and the promise that 'it shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever' (Dn. 2:44), is already starting to be fulfilled. The fulfilment is a process, not a crisis; and a lengthy one, not a sudden one, we may observe—for though events at its climax will move swiftly enough, the process itself will occupy the whole of the gospel age, from the inauguration of the kingdom (12:10) to its final triumph (11:15). If this that Daniel has foreseen for the latter days is what the angel is now bringing into John's immediate purview, then 'the time is near' indeed. As soon as his letter reaches its destination in the churches of Asia, they will be able to say, 'These things are happening now.' Such immediacy it has always had for attentive readers, and so it can reveal to us in our own twentieth-century world the present reality of the conflict between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of our Lord."
  - At the end of the day don't get bogged down in exactly what this means. The big message is that these things are imminent and so we need to take them to heart!
- ***What is meant by "the seven spirits" (v4)?***

- John clearly believes that there is only 1 Holy Spirit and not 7 (see 22:17 - "the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.'")
- The number 7 occurs throughout the book (e.g. 7 churches, 7 bowls, etc.) We need to understand that in the genre of Apocalyptic literature numbers have symbolic meaning. In Apocalyptic writing '7' is the complete or perfect number. For example we speak of someone sailing the seven seas. That does not mean that there are only seven seas. Instead it conveys the idea that someone has sailed all the seas.
- This means that the seven spirits (or the seven-fold spirit) denotes the Perfect Completeness of the Holy Spirit. He is the perfect and complete Spirit.

## **Big Idea**

**Take to heart that Jesus is the risen King, who has rescued his people and who will return in victory**

## **Suggested Areas of Application**

- Take to heart what we read in Revelation (even when it's tricky)
- Remember who Jesus really is
- Remember who we really are as Christians and keep on serving the King

## **Suggested Bible Study**

### **Starter Question**

#### **1. What do you think society says about God, Jesus and Christians?**

*This question is designed to be an open question that anyone can answer. There are no right or wrong answers, we are giving people the chance to offer their opinion. This question will provide a contrast between what the world thinks and the reality that is revealed in Revelation. As we go through the study you could point out the big differences between what the world says and what God says (i.e. reality.)*

### **Digging into v1-3 (Observation and Interpretations Questions)**

#### **2. Have a look at v1-3. Where does this Revelation come from?**

*This question is an observation question and so anyone should be able to answer it simply by looking down and reading the passage. The big thing to see is that Revelation is not just something that John made up. There is a chain - God --> Jesus --> Angel --> John --> Servants (Christians.)*

#### **3. Why can we trust this Revelation?**

*Building on Q2 we can trust that Revelation is true (even the tricky bits) because of where/ who it comes from. Ultimately this is from God so we know that it is true.*

#### **4. What are we to do with this Revelation?**

*Again this is a simple observation question that anyone can answer simply by reading v3 - we are to take to heart what is written in Revelation. Here is the big application of the whole book. As a result our studies should keep coming back to this idea of taking to heart what we have read. Keep asking yourself and your group "What will it mean to take this to heart?"*

#### **5. What do you think it means to "take to heart"?**

*Here again is an interpretation question but it is one that anyone can have a go at answering. Ultimately this is about letting what we read shape how we think about the world. God is drawing back the curtain and showing us how things really are. As a result taking to heart what we read will mean reorienting our thinking and our actions accordingly.*

### **Digging into v4-8 (Observation and Interpretation Questions)**

#### **6. What are we told about;**

- **The Father**
  - *He's eternal (v4 & 8) - you may need to ask the group what is meant by "first and last" and "alpha and omega".*
  - *He's king (v4) - notice that he's on the throne - it's not empty.*
  
- **The Spirit**
  - *He's Perfect (v4) - seven*
  - *He's before the throne - picks up the idea of him being before the Father on our behalf.*
  
- **Jesus Christ**
  - *Faithful witness (5) - he's our example of remaining faithful to God even to death*
  - *Firstborn from among the dead (v5) - he's risen and he will raise us too.*
  - *He's King of everyone everywhere (v5) - great encouragement when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians.*
  - *He loves us and has demonstrated his love by setting us free from our sins and making us a kingdom of priests (v6.)*
  - *He will come again in judgment (v7)*
  
- **Christians**
  - *We are loved by Jesus (v6)*
  - *We have been set free from our sins (v6)*
  - *We are a kingdom and priests (v6) (i.e. we are God's people who are called to serve God in his world.)*

### **Applying the whole passage (Application Questions)**

#### **7. Many of the original readers of Revelation were facing persecution, slander, imprisonment and even death because of their faith. How would this passage help and encourage them?**

*This is an important first step of application because we are not the original recipients of the letter. We need to think of how it would have applied to the 1st century Christians in the 7 churches before we can apply it correctly to ourselves.*

*Get the group to think about how the different things we have been told in this passage would have encouraged the Christians to keep serving God even when they were facing persecution. Again there are not necessarily any right or wrong answers so everyone can have a go at answering the question.*

#### **8. Think about what's going on in your own life at the moment. What do you need to take to heart from these verses?**

*Now we can turn to apply the passage to ourselves. People might be a bit shy about answering this question so be prepared to kick off the discussion by sharing how you are going to take this passage to heart. If necessary you could split the group into smaller groups or pairs to answer this question.*

**9. Think about what is going on in our country and around the world at the moment. What do we need to take to heart from these verses as we look at the world?**

*This question like the one above is all about taking what we have learnt about God and ourselves in this passage and applying it to ourselves. Why not take some examples from the news and ask what difference Revelation 1:1-8 makes to how we view these news events.*

## Revelation 1:9-20

### Context

- *Old Testament*
  - The imagery in these verses draws heavily on two of Daniel's visions in Daniel 7 & 10. It is well worth reading these chapters as well as Ezekiel 1 as you prepare Revelation 1. These chapters will help us interpret the confusing imagery that we find in Revelation 1 and tell us even more about Jesus.
- *New Testament*
  - John describes Jesus as "like a son of man" this was one of Jesus' favourite descriptions of himself which only goes to confirm for us that this is a vision of Jesus.
  - John is overwhelmed by what he sees and so he "fell at his feet as though dead" (v17.) Back in Luke 5:1-11, Peter responds in a similar way to Jesus and the miraculous catch of fish. Both in Revelation 1 and Luke 5 Jesus' response is to say, "Don't be afraid."
- *Revelation*
  - Several key themes and phrases that occurred in 1:1-8 are repeated here. For example, in 1:5 we were told that Jesus is the firstborn from among the dead, and now in 1:18 we are told that he is "the living one" who was dead and now is alive for ever and ever! Similarly in 1:6 we are told that Jesus has made us a kingdom and again in 1:9 John says that he is a fellow brother and companion in "the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance." There are several other repetitions but perhaps the most interesting of all is that in 1:8 The Lord God (that is God the Father) says that he is the "Alpha and the Omega" and now in 1:17 Jesus says that he is the "First and Last" which equates to the same thing. Jesus is therefore saying that he is just as much God as the Father and is indeed one with the Father (see John 10:30.)
  - Many of the things we are told about Jesus in 1:9-20 are going to be repeated in the letters to the churches in ch2-3. We will pay more attention to this when we come to the letters but for now at least it is simply good to see how chapter 1 is linked with chapters 2-3.

### Structure

- **v9-11 - Where John Is**
  - **"Suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus..."** - This phrase is a key phrase in Revelation and sums up the Christian experience in the last days (the time between Jesus' ascension and coming again.) In this world we will often experience suffering because of Jesus but we are also part of his unshakable kingdom. We suffer because we are in Christ but we are also victorious because we are in Christ and benefit from his death and resurrection (see 1:5-6.) As a result we are called to patiently endure the suffering that we experience because it is temporary and one day Christ will return and his kingdom and victory will be fully realised. Patient endurance is a key and repeated application in this book. What we are being shown is not just for our curiosity or entertainment. Instead it is spur us on to patiently endure for Christ.
- **"... was on the Island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus"** - John was not on Patmos for a holiday, he was there because he was in prison. The elderly John has been imprisoned on this island because of the gospel (see Luke 5:1, 8:11, 8:21, 11:28 and Acts 4:31 for just a few

of the examples that show us that this phrase refers to the gospel.) Notice how the phrase "word of God and testimony of Jesus" has already occurred in 1:2 to describe the contents of Revelation. Putting all this together tells us that at the end of the day Revelation is about the gospel! For all the weird imagery let's remember this as we study it. What we need most of all when suffering is to be reminded of the gospel and the results of the gospel. This is what will cause us to patiently endure.

- "Voice like a trumpet" - In Exodus 19:16, 19-20 a trumpet was associated with God coming and speaking to his people. When the trumpet sounds you know that he King is going to address his people.
- **v12-16 - What John Saw**
  - **Seven Golden Lampstands** - In the Old Testament lampstands are associated with the tabernacle and the temple (see Exodus 25, 37 and Numbers 8.) The key reference is Zechariah 4:2, 10 where the lampstands represent faithful Israel. Revelation 1:20 makes clear that this is the image that is being used here because these seven lampstands represent the seven churches, the new faithful Israel.
  - **Son of Man walking amongst the lampstands** - The Son of Man imagery comes from Daniel 7:13-14 where this Son of Man comes in power on the clouds of heaven. He then comes before the Ancient of Days (God the Father) and is "given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom (which is what we are according to Rev 1:6, 9) is one that will never be destroyed." When we combine this with the gospels where Jesus repeatedly describes himself as the Son of Man (Mark 10:45) we see that this is Jesus. What a massive encouragement it must have been for the suffering Christians of the 7 churches to know that Jesus was the all-powerful, victorious, unbeatable Son of Man! And how amazing and encouraging it must have been for them to be told that this Jesus, this Son of Man was walking amongst the lampstands. In other words Jesus is with his people, even as they suffer. As he will repeatedly say in ch2-3 he knows what's going on. He knows their faith, their love, their deeds but also their sin. That Jesus is always with his people, and always sees what is going on is a great encouragement when we suffer, but also a serious warning when we sin.
  - **The Robe and the Sash** - Here the key reference is Daniel 10:5 which seems to suggest that Jesus is being depicted here as the great high priest. Some people argue that this is how a king would have dressed and this is certainly a possibility. I am, however, persuaded that the robe and sash are priestly because one of the jobs of the priests in the temple was to tend and to trim the lampstands and that is exactly what Jesus is going to do as he addresses the churches (lampstands) in chapters 2-3. Indeed in Revelation 2:5 he threatens to take away the lampstand of the church of Ephesus. As our great high priest Jesus has loved us "and freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Revelation 1:5-6.)
  - **His Hair was white like snow** - The key reference here is Daniel 7:9-10 where the Ancient of Days (God the Father) is described in similar terms. There the Ancient of Days is the perfect and pure judge of all and by applying the same term to Jesus we are being reminded that Jesus is one with the Father (John 10:30) and is the

one who will judge all the living and the dead (we have already seen this theme in 1:7.)

- **His Eyes like blazing fire** - Again the key reference is Daniel 10:6 and again seems to speak not only of Jesus' power but also of his judgment. He is the one who sees all things and who's purity, like fire, is all consuming. This is no tame and fluffy Jesus we are seeing.
- **His Feet like bronze glowing in a furnace** - Again Daniel 10:6 is key here. The bronze glowing speaks of his moral purity. Some suggest that the reference to the furnace which is not found in Daniel 10:6 is a reference to Daniel 3:25 when the three men were thrown into the furnace but Nebuchadnezzar saw a fourth man who "looks like a son of the gods."
- **His Voice like the sound of rushing waters** - This image is taken from Ezekiel's vision in Ezekiel 1:24 and clearly speaks of the power of Jesus' voice. I assume that John would have recognised Jesus' voice from his three years with him, but now John hears Jesus' voice with all it's heavenly glory and power unleashed.
- **Seven Stars in his right hand** - See the tricky bits below for a comment on the angels. For now notice that Jesus is holding these representatives of the church in his right hand. The right hand was the hand of power and strength and so to hold something in your right hand means that it is secure. To be held in Jesus' right hand is to be absolutely safe. Again what an encouragement to John's companions in the "suffering and kingdom and patient endurance"? And what an encouragement to us too? Why not stop and take a moment to meditate on and praise God that the risen and victorious King Jesus, the Son of Man, holds you in his right hand and will not let you go...
- **Sharp double-edged sword in his mouth** - Again here we pick up the idea that Jesus' words are a powerful and sharp weapon. The imagery comes from Isaiah 11:4 where the word of God is a sharp weapon of judgment. Again therefore we are seeing the theme of Jesus as the judge repeating as we move through chapter 1. Again what an encouragement to those who are suffering - justice will be done. Yet at the same time what a warning to those unrepentant of their sin - justice will be done!
- **His face shining in all its brilliance** - Again Daniel 10:6 is an important reference but so is Judges 5:31 where Deborah sings about a great Warrior of Israel who's loved ones will shine like the sun. The big thing we are to take from this is just how awesome Jesus the Risen and Victorious Warrior King really is.
- Before we move on to the next few verses just stop and meditate on what we have seen of Jesus. Take each of the details and turn them around and around in your mind. Chew on them and reflect on what they mean and the impact this has on you. Think about how each of them encourages and challenges you in your life at the moment. Then turn to praise God for who Jesus is...

- ***v17-20 - What John Heard***

- **"Fell at his feet as though dead..."** - This is absolutely the right response to such a vision of Jesus in all his power and perfect purity. This was Daniel's response in Daniel 8 and 10:8-20.
- **"He Placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid...'"** - As we have already mentioned this is exactly what Jesus did and said to Peter back in Luke 5. After such an amazing vision of Jesus this is unexpected. Sinful human beings should be extinguished when confronted with the holy God, and yet mercifully Jesus reaches out and speaks words of comfort. Clearly Jesus' words apply firstly to John in his unique situation before Jesus. Yet I wonder whether there was also a secondary application to the seven churches. Time and again throughout Revelation the message to suffering Christians who are being threatened by the world is "Don't be afraid." As Jesus speaks to John here, he is also speaking to all his people who are afraid. As we face our fears and anxieties in life Jesus says "Don't be afraid" and the reason we need not be afraid is because of what we have seen of Jesus in the preceding verses. The All-powerful, holy, risen champion Jesus is with his people, he holds us in his hand and he is coming in judgment so that every wrong will be put right - therefore no matter what you are facing "Do not be afraid." Again why not take a moment to apply these words to your own fears and anxieties at the moment.
- **"First and Last"** - As already mentioned this theme of being eternal has already occurred in 1:8 but now instead of being applied to the Father it is applied to Jesus. The Son is eternal just like the Father. In the words of the Creed he is Begotten but not made. He is without beginning and without out because he is the uncreated creator.
  - Just as a little aside. Here's a great verse to share with the Jehovah's Witnesses when they knock on your door next because they believe that Jesus as God the Son is not equal with God the Father. Yet here the Bible clearly says that the Son is eternal just like the Father.
- **"I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!"** - As in 1:5 we are reminded that Jesus is risen. He has conquered death and therefore will never die. He has defeated the great enemy and so there is nothing for his people to fear. As we often sing "Not even death could crush this king of love.."
- **"I hold the keys of death and Hades."** - Because Jesus has beaten death he is the one who holds the keys to death and as we all know the person who has the keys has the power. The person with the keys to the tuck shop full of sweets has the power over the tuck shop. As Morris says "He has the power to send people to death and to Hades or to deliver them from them. He is supreme, and a supremacy over the spirit world and over death itself is a supremacy such as the tyrants who persecuted John's readers never dreamed of."

### **Tricky Bits**

- ***What does John mean when he says that he was "in the Spirit"? (v10)***
  - Various possibilities are given for this and I don't think we should get bogged down in trying to work it out. Most likely John was in some sort of Spirit-induced trance which made him ready to see the vision.
- ***What is Hades? (v18)***

- See Acts 2:27, 31. Both "the grave" and Hades refer to the place of the dead but not hell or the new creation. The important thing here is that it is lined up alongside death as an enemy, and yet it is a conquered enemy because the risen Jesus has the key.
- ***What are the angels of the seven churches? (v20)***
  - The word could be messenger and so some people think that it could be referring to the Pastors/Leaders of the churches. Others think that it refers to the human messengers who would have carried the letter to the different churches. Both of these are quite possible and yet I think that the more likely explanation is that these are real angels who are representatives of the church. My reason for saying this is that later in Revelation 8:3-4 we see Angels acting as representative for Christians so it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the churches have angelic representatives. If this is the case then the churches are being reminded "that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly... and that they have help and protection in their struggle." (Beale.)

**Big Idea - Don't be afraid because the all-powerful, perfectly pure, risen and victorious Jesus is with his people and will not let us go!**

### **Suggested Areas of Application**

- Don't be Afraid - whatever our fears and whatever we face as Christians in this world we need to view them in the light of who Jesus is. So often we view Jesus in the light of our problems when what we really need to do is view our problems in the light of Jesus. The big aim of this study is for us to have our view of Jesus expanded so that we see that ultimately we really do have nothing to fear! It would be great if the group were able to be honest with their fears and anxieties and then could help each other to see these fears in the light of Jesus.
- Don't be Complacent - We should not ignore the themes of Jesus' perfect moral purity and holiness as well as his judgment. As we will see in chapters 2-3 Jesus hates sin in his people and repeatedly commands people in the churches to repent. So whilst this vision of Jesus is reassuring as we face our fears, it should also be a warning to us as we face our sin. Seeing Jesus like this should cause us, like Peter in Luke 5 to be made acutely aware of our sin and repent and confess it, trusting that Jesus has freed us from our sins.

### **Suggested Bible Study**

#### **Starter Question**

#### **1. What are the big things that people in our society are afraid of?**

*If a big application of this passage is that as Christians we need not be afraid because of who Jesus is, then it would be good to start the study by talking about fears. It would probably be too abrupt and personal to start the study by asking people about their own personal fears so instead it is best to keep the conversation about fears quite general at this point.*

#### **Digging into v9-11 (Observation and Interpretation Question)**

#### **2. What do we learn about John and the churches he is writing to in v9-11?**

*John and the churches are brothers and companions who are sharing in suffering but also the kingdom and patient endurance. John is imprisoned on Patmos because of the gospel so life is clearly not easy for any of them.*

### **Digging into v12-16 (Observation and Interpretation Questions)**

#### **3. What does John see in v12-16?**

*Here we simply want to get the group to go through the passage and pick out all the details (see the notes above for the details and what they mean.) We want to help the to build up the big picture of what we are being told about Jesus. The aim is not to have a mental image of Jesus. Instead we are to be hit by the impact of the vision.*

#### **4. How do v19-20 as well as Daniel 7 and Daniel 10 help us to understand the vision?**

*Why not get the group to turn to these passages to help us interpret the different elements of the vision. Remember that this vision draws heavily on Old Testament sources. If we ignore the Old Testament context of these images then we might misapply the details. For instance without the Old Testament we might think that the white hair suggests old age and infirmity. Yet when we turn to Daniel we see that it is applied to the Ancient of Days who is the all-powerful, holy judge.*

### **Digging into v17-20 (Observation and Interpretation Questions)**

#### **5. What does Jesus say to John?**

*Again go through and pick out the details. Take your time to stop and think about each thing that is brought out, don't rush, take the time to reflect on each thing.*

#### **6. Why does Jesus tell John not to be afraid?**

*Here is the big application of the passage and it is supported by all that we have seen in v12-16 and all that Jesus has said in v17-18. Help the group to see that because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us there really is nothing we need fear.*

### **Applying v9-20 (Applications Questions)**

#### **7. How would v12-20 have encouraged the 7 churches?**

*Again it is always important to ask "What would this have meant for the first readers?" before we ask "What does it mean for us today?" Think about how they were suffering, think about how John was imprisoned. Perhaps you could even pick out some of the details from the letters in chapters 2-3. Think about how they would have been encouraged to persevere and not give up in their faith because of what they have been told about Jesus.*

#### **8. How would v12-20 have challenged the 7 churches?**

*Whilst these verses are incredibly reassuring they are also challenging because we have been repeatedly told that Jesus is the perfectly pure and holy judge. Therefore these verses would have been a challenge and a warning to those people in the churches who were caught up in sin.*

#### **9. How do v12-20 encourage and/or challenge you?**

*Encourage the group to think about the big fears that we and our society have. Why not spend some time considering those very real fears in the light of what we have learnt in this passage. People might be initially reluctant to open up about their fears so be prepared to start things off by talking about some of your own fears and how this passage has encouraged you.*

## Revelation 2:1-7 - Ephesus

### Context

- *Revelation*
  - Chapter 1 - The letters to the churches are linked to chapter 1 because each letter starts with a brief description of Jesus which is taken from 1:9-20. A particular aspect of the vision of chapter one is specifically selected for each church and their situation.
  - Chapters 21-22 - Each letter finishes with Christ making a promise to the victorious who obey his word. All of these promises are version of the same final promise that is found in 21:7 (notice the reference to the victorious.) Each of the promises is all about God's people enjoying God's presence and blessing which is the climax of the book in the final chapters.
- *New Testament*
  - Ephesus - Ephesus was the major port city on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey.) The city was famous for the temple to Diana (also known as Artemis) and much of the economy revolved around the idol worship of the temple. It was also a place of sorcery. Paul came to the city in Acts 19 and stayed for two years preaching in the synagogue and then in the lecture hall of Tyrannaus. As a result a church was established and this church and the gospel went out from Ephesus across the whole region (see Acts 19:10.) In Acts 20 we get Paul's famous farewell address to the Ephesians elders where amongst other things he tells them to watch out for false teachers (see Acts 20:28-31.) This theme is picked up in his later letters to Timothy where it appears that false teachers were a problem (see 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 1:18-20, 4:1-5, 6:3-5.) This is significant because in Revelation 2:2 Jesus commends the church for not tolerating wicked people and false teachers which suggests that the church had heeded Paul's earlier warning and letters.
- *Old Testament*
  - Lampstands - The image of a lampstand is a key part of this letter (v1, 5) and it is taken from Zechariah 4:2 where they symbolise the faithful remnant of Israel. Like a lampstand Israel were to be a light to the rest of the world. In the New Testament the church is to be a light to the world as the people of God (see Matthew 5:14-16 and Mark 4:21-25.)
  - Tree of Life - This image originally comes from Genesis 2-3 and the Garden of Eden. It is repeated at the end of Revelation in 22:2 and therefore signifies the blessing of God dwelling with his people in God's place.

### Structure

- **v1 - A Description of Christ**
  - Picking up on 1:12-13 and 1:16 we are told that Jesus is the one who walks amongst his people and who holds his people firmly in his right hand. The implication of this is that Jesus is always in the midst of his people and thus he really does know all about their deeds, hard work, perseverance and sound doctrine (v2-3.) Yet because he is in their midst he also knows that the Ephesians have lost their first love. As a result v1 is both comforting and uncomfortable at the same time.
- **v2-3 - Christ's Commendation of the Church**
  - Christ praises them for their hard work and their perseverance in the face of hardship (twice). He also commends them for how they have tested out false teachers and do not tolerate wickedness. As previously mentioned this seems to show that they had

responded to Paul's warning and letters. It highlights for us that there are times when it is good for churches to be intolerant. This might be shocking in our society today but Jesus commends them for being intolerant of false teaching and wickedness. Although the primary focus is rightly on how they have lost their first love we should also recognise that hard work, perseverance and sound doctrine are commended in this letter and so we should strive for them. We should be as sharp as possible at spotting error and challenge wickedness whenever and wherever we see it.

- **v4 - Christ's Complaint of the Church**

- Despite all the many things in their favour Jesus says they have lost their first love. This is obviously a major problem because he urges them to repent and threatens to take away their lampstand if they do not.
- For more information on what is meant by "forsaking the love you had at first" and "remove your lampstand" see the Tricky Bits below.

- **v5-6 Christ's Command and Warning to the Church**

- Jesus tells them to do 3 things;
  - First they are to **Consider/Remember** the heights from which they have fallen! They are to think back to how they began as a church. No doubt their love had gone out so slowly that they had not noticed it going. Jesus tells them to remember how they began.
  - Second he tells them to **Repent!** Having seen how far they have fallen they are to confess this and turn around. They are not just to remember the good old days but stay where they are. Instead they are to turn around and head back to where they once were.
  - Third they are to **do the things you did at first**. This is slightly surprising because Jesus' complaint is that they have lost their first love. Jesus clearly equates this first love with action. We will consider this further in the tricky bits. For now let's notice that repentance involves action. Repentance is not just about turning around, it is about going in a new direction.
- This is clearly serious because Jesus warns them that if they do not repent then he will come in judgment and take away the lampstand of the church. This challenges the mindset which assumes that it is acceptable to and unavoidable to lose the love and zeal that we started the Christian life with. Jesus clearly wants us to be as zealous and passionate after 50 years as a Christian as we were on day one. To lose our first love is serious and no amount of hard work, perseverance and sound doctrine can make up for it!

- **v7 - Christ's Promise to the Church**

- As with every letter Jesus' command also comes with a promise. To the one who is victorious/overcomes Jesus promises the chance to eat from the tree of life which is in the paradise of God. The key here (as with all the promises in the letters) is not to get bogged down in the precise detail of the promise. Instead we are to see the big picture of the promise which is that Jesus promises that his people will dwell with him in God's paradise enjoying the blessing of dwelling with God. That which was lost at the fall will be perfectly restored, and even surpassed, because of the death of Christ at the cross. Here is the incentive for the Ephesians repentance.

### Tricky Bits

- **Who were the Nicolaitans and what did they do wrong?**

- It is hard to know much about this group but clearly Jesus wasn't a fan (see v6)!!! They also crop up in 2:15 where they are likened to the group of people who hold to

the teaching of Balaam. The word "likewise" in 2:15 suggests that the Nicolaitans, like the Balaam group, promoted eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.

- This would fit with what we know about Ephesus where because of the temple there would have been a big pressure on Christians to be involved in the idolatry and sexual immorality that was associated with the temple. The temple would have not just been a place for religious worship, it was also a social and business centre and so if as a Christian you disassociated yourself from the temple then you were cutting yourself off socially and financially. As a result there would no doubt have been a strong pressure and temptation to go along with the pagan practice of eating food sacrificed to idols and sleeping with the temple prostitutes. Throughout the New Testament it is made clear that this is not acceptable Christian living (see Acts 15:20.)
- **What was their first love?**
  - This is the big question of the passage and the answer we give will dramatically shape the application of the passage. There seem to be three main interpretations.
    - Firstly some people think that this refers to their love for each other. As a result Jesus is complaining that they have stopped loving each other. This is certainly not impossible.
    - Secondly others suggest that Jesus is complaining that they have lost their love for him. Again this is very possible.
    - Thirdly it could be that when Jesus says they have lost first love he means that "they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus by witnessing to him in the world." (Beale.) I think that this interpretation is correct for the following reasons.
      - First, look at how Jesus introduces himself to the church in v1. He reminds them that he walks among the lampstands. Remember how we have said that the lampstands represent the people of God and that a key part of being the people of God, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, is that we are to be a witnessing light to the world.
      - Second, look at what Jesus threatens to do if they do not repent in v5. He threatens to remove their lampstand. This is the only church that is threatened with such a measure which should make us ask why? Beale argues that the punishment (removal of the lampstand) fits the sin (failing to be a light to the world.) This also fits with Jesus' reference to be a light in the New Testament. Turn to Mark 4 and notice the similarities with what Jesus is saying in Revelation 2:4-6. Notice in Mark 4:21 how Jesus implies that the church is a light and that like all other lights our light is not to be hidden away but to be put out for all to see. Notice too how in v25 he says that "whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." This has strong connections with Revelation 2:5 where he threatens to take away their lampstand. Finally notice how Jesus' words in Mark 4:23 that "whoever has ears let him hear" is very similar to Jesus' words in Revelation 2:7 "Whoever has ears..."
      - Thirdly, the interpretation that their first love was not just to do with their love for Jesus but was a bigger thing to do with their evangelism fits with Jesus' call to "repent and do the things you did at first" (v5.) They are a hard working church so the issue is not one of laziness, the issue is that they had stopped doing something vital. They had stopped being a light to the world as an expression of their love for Jesus.
    - In summary this means that it is not wrong to say that their first love was love for Jesus but it is more than that. Their first love was love for Jesus expressed in evangelistic zeal. If you really love someone then you want to tell people about them. In summary Jesus is saying that if they don't start being a light to the world

then he will come and snuff out their light because what's the point of a lamp if you hide it away for no-one to see. The point of the church is to be a light to the world. Back in 1:6 we were told that through Christ's death on the cross he has made us to be a kingdom and priests. As we said back in chapter 1 that means that we are to talk to God on behalf of the world but it also means that we are to talk to the world on behalf of God. When a church stops doing this then it's abandoned its reason for existing and so Jesus will come and remove the church.

## **Big Idea**

## **Hard Work + Sound Doctrine + Perseverance - Evangelism = A Church in Real Danger!**

### **Suggested Areas of Application**

- **Hard work, perseverance in the face of hardship and sound doctrine are all good things.**
  - We should not miss the fact that Jesus praises them for these things. We should be a church where everyone is working hard and using their gifts to serve the church and build up the body.
  - Again we should be a church that can spot false teaching and challenges it. We are not to tolerate false teaching or immorality. Perhaps you could spend some time talking about how you would go about confronting false teaching or immorality? Perhaps you could make up some scenarios to help your group think this through.
- **Hard work, perseverance and sound doctrine are no substitute for love for Jesus expressed in evangelism.**
  - It might be a really tough question to answer but what does our evangelism say about our love for Jesus?
  - Did we start out the Christian life with great evangelistic zeal? Has it subsequently faded? We need to remember the enthusiasm and zeal with which we started the Christian life and ask ourselves whether that is still there?
  - This study will clearly open up the whole conversation of evangelism which could make people feel guilty. The aim of this study is not to leave people feeling guilty. If our evangelistic zeal has faded then Jesus tells us to repent, to confess our sin and to turn around and do the things we did before. As we do that we can have confidence that he will forgive us because of his promise here in 2:7 and because of the great truth of 1:5 that he has freed us from our sins by his blood. Perhaps your prayer time this week could include a time where we confess and repent our lack of evangelistic zeal and pray that God would give us the boldness and opportunities to let our light shine before men.

### **Suggested Bible Study**

#### **Starter Question**

#### **1. What do you think a healthy church looks like? How would you describe BEC?**

*The aim of this study is to see that a healthy church is not just a hard working and doctrinally sound church. A healthy church is also one that continues to express its love for Jesus with evangelistic zeal. As a result we want to start off by getting people to think about what a healthy church looks like. At the same time it will also be good to see whether people think BEC is healthy and if so, why?*

**Digging into the passage (Observation and Interpretation Questions - you could get the grid to fill in the blank table that you received at the Pit Stop)**

**2. How does Jesus describe himself? (v1)**

*This question is a simple observation question. People just have to read verse 1 to get the answer. You might like to point out that this repeats what we were told about Jesus in chapter 1.*

**3. What is the message from v1 to the church?**

*This tells us that Jesus is with his church. As a result he really does know their deeds. He knows what is going on, he knows what they've faced.*

*The group might pick up on the fact that the church is described as a lampstand. As a result this reminds us that the church is to be evangelistic as God's light to the world. Don't worry if the group does not pick up on this at this stage because we will revisit this later in the study.*

**4. What does Jesus like about the church? (v2-3, 6)**

*He praises them for three things. Their hard work, their perseverance in the face of hardship and their doctrinal soundness which is seen in how they have not tolerated wickedness and false teaching. This last one might surprise the group and would certainly surprise our society because Jesus is praising the church for being intolerant. This is a reminder that as Christians there are times when we need to be intolerant of sin and false teaching.*

**5. What does Jesus not like about the church?**

*They have forsaken the love they had at first, but what does that mean?*

*To understand what is meant by "first love", work through the following questions;*

**1. If the church is a lamp then what is the job of the church? (Look at Mark 4:21-25 to help.)**

*As a lamp the church is to be God's evangelistic light in a dark world. This picks up in 1:6 where we are told that Christ has made us to be priests. As priests we are to talk to God on behalf of the world (prayer) and we are to talk to the world on behalf of God (evangelism.)*

**2. Why do you think Jesus chooses to remind this church (and not the others) that they are a lampstand? (v1)**

*Remind the groups that Jesus has specifically picked the description at the start of each letter because of it's relevance for that particular church. He reminds Ephesus that they are a lampstand because they have stopped letting their evangelistic light shine before men. This fits with Mark 4.*

**3. Why does Jesus only threaten to take away their lampstand and not the lampstand of any of the other churches?**

*Again Jesus' warning to the churches are specific to each church. He warns them that he will take away their lampstand because they have stopped being a light to the world. This fits with Mark 4.*

**4. What does all this tell us about what it means to "lose the love you had at first"?**

*Putting all this together we see that to lose your first love does not just refer to not loving people and it is not just love for Jesus. Their first love was their love for*

*Jesus expressed in their evangelistic zeal. They have lost this and so they have stopped being a light to the world.*

**6. What does Jesus command the church to do? (v5)**

*Again he tells them to do three things. First they are to consider/remember how things were when they first became Christians. He wants them to remember the evangelistic zeal and enthusiasm that they had when the church began. Second he wants them to repent. Losing our evangelistic zeal is something that we need to repent of. That means we need to confess our sin, stop going the way we are going and turn around and get back to how things were when we started out as Christians full of evangelistic zeal. Thirdly he tells them to get back to how things used to be when they expressed their love for Jesus by being a light for him in a dark world.*

**7. What warning does Jesus give the church? (v5)**

*If they do not repent then he will take away their lampstand. In effect Jesus is saying that if they don't stop hiding their light then he will take away their light because what's the point of having a light hidden away. Similarly there's no point in having a church that isn't being an evangelistic light to the world around them.*

**8. What does Jesus promise to those who repent? (v7)**

*The specific promise is to eat from the tree of life. More generally this is a picture of dwelling with God just as Adam and Eve enjoyed in Eden. See 22:2 for more on the tree of life in Revelation.*

**Applying the passage (Application Questions)**

**9. What does a healthy church look like according to this passage?**

*Hard Working + Persevering + Intolerant of Wickedness and False Teaching + Continuing to express love for Jesus in Evangelistic Zeal = A Healthy Church*

*You might like to compare this with what the group said at the beginning of the study. Are there things in this passage that have surprised the group?*

**10. What does our evangelism say about our love for Jesus?**

*This is perhaps a very personal question and the danger is that we just beat ourselves up, that is not the aim. Perhaps you could lead group members through the three stages in v5. Start by getting them to remember how they started out in the Christian life and compare it with how things are now? Again the aim is not to beat ourselves up, instead the aim is to lead us to repentance trusting that he will forgive us and free us from our sins.*

**11. If we have lost our evangelistic zeal then how can we get it back?**

*It would be really good to end on this practical note. Wouldn't it be great if as a group we were a source of encouragement and support for each other as we all seek to be a light to those around us.*

## Revelation 2:8-11 - Smyrna

### Context

- *Smyrna* - Smyrna was a beautiful, prosperous and wealthy town to the North of Ephesus. It had been destroyed in the 7th century BC but then rebuilt in the 3rd century BC. The city was proud of its strong connections with Rome and it had a temple devoted to the Emperor. The city was also famous for its arena and its games and so the idea of receiving a victor's crown would be an image that they were familiar with. As a result worshipping the Roman Emperor was a big deal in the city and this caused great difficulty for Christians. Indeed in approximately 156AD Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna was martyred by being burnt at the stake for refusing to offer a sacrifice to the Roman Emperor. In the Amphitheatre the Roman Proconsul told Polycarp to "Swear by the genius of Caesar... Swear and I will release you; revile Christ!" In response Polycarp said, "For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong; how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?" If Polycarp had been a Christian for 86 years when he died in 156AD then there is every chance that he had been part of the church when they received this letter that warned them to expect prison and even death for their fate.
- *Chapter 1* - Each of the letters starts with a description of Christ that is specifically chosen from chapter 1 and applied to each of the churches. Jesus reminds the church at Smyrna that he is eternal (first and last) and the one who by his death and resurrection has defeated death (See below for why Jesus chose to remind the church at Smyrna of this.) Another link to chapter 1 is the theme of persecution and suffering (see 1:9 and 2:9-10, again this will be developed further later.)
- *Chapters 2-3* - Each of the letters follows the same basic structure yet in this letter Jesus has no complaints against the church at Smyrna. This stands in sharp contrast to churches like Ephesus where they had lost their first love and Pergamum where they had people encouraging Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols and to engage in sexual immorality.
- *Chapters 20-22* - Each of the letters finishes with Jesus making a promise to those who overcome/ are victorious. The different imagery that he uses in each letter is taken from chapters 20-22 and in this letter the idea of the second death is used (see 20:11-15.)

### Structure

- **v8 - A Description of Christ**
  - **First and Last** - Jesus reminds the church that he is the eternal one. He was before all things and in him all things hold together. He is above and beyond time because time is a part of his creation. By saying that he is the first and last Jesus' clearly claiming to be God because in 1:8 God the Father is described similarly as "the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come." The church is being reminded that no matter what is thrown at them - Jesus is bigger and ultimately he is sovereign, even over the devil! The phrase has its roots in Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12 where it is used to make the point that apart from the LORD there are no other Gods and that he is sovereign over history and in control of everything. Such a message would have been very appropriate for the church at Smyrna considering what they were facing.

- **Who died and came to life again** - Repeatedly throughout Revelation Jesus reminds his church that he is the one who has conquered death by his death and resurrection. In 1:18 he tells us that he is "the Living One; I was dead, and now look I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." Jesus has won the victory over death and so he has power of life and death over everyone. What a great encouragement to the church at Smyrna who faced the prospect of dying for their faith. Jesus' resurrection means that his promises of eternal life in v10-11 are rock solid promises that we can depend upon and thus no matter what we face we need not ultimately be afraid. Some commentators suggest that another reason for Jesus reminding them of his resurrection is that Smyrna was a city that had literally been resurrected after it was destroyed. This is a nice detail that may be true but the big reason Jesus includes this description is because his resurrection is the reason they need not be afraid and can have certain that he will give them the crown of life.
- **v9 - Christ's Commendation of the Church**
  - **"I know your Afflictions..."** - Jesus speaks with great intimacy. Just as he knew the deeds of the Ephesians so he knows the afflictions that they church at Smyrna were facing. What a great comfort that Jesus is not blind to the pain and struggles of his people! He goes on to spell out their afflictions in the rest of v9.
  - **"...Poverty - yet you are rich!"** - We cannot be absolutely certain why the Christians were financially poor but one suggestion is that it could have been to do with their reluctance to worship the Roman Emperor. Smyrna was a wealthy city because of it's port but much of it's business and commerce would probably have been centred around the temple to the Roman Emperor. This would have meant that if you were not prepared to go to the temple and make offerings to the Emperor then you may well have lost out in financial and business terms. As I say, we can't be sure why they were financially poor but Jesus is adamant that they are spiritually rich. Stott reminds us that "It is possible to be impoverished in material things and yet enriched in Christ in every way, enjoying 'the unsearchable riches of Christ' (1 Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 3:8.)" At the cross Jesus "though he was rich, yet for your sakes became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9.) As a result a single mum on benefits can be richer than the richest Mercedes driving Investment Banker.
  - **" I know about the Slander"** - As with the poverty we cannot say for certain what the Jews were saying about the Christians that was so slanderous. What we can say is that the gospels and Acts show us that the majority of the early opposition and persecution that the church endured came from Jewish people. It seems that the Jews were spreading some sort of false rumours about the Christians. For more details on why Jesus describes these Jews as a Synagogue of Satan see the Tricky Bits below.
- **v10 - Christ's Command to the Church**
  - **"Do not be afraid..."** - Jesus not only knows what they are currently suffering, he also knows what that they are about to suffer imprisonment and even death. Considering what they were about to experience Jesus' command to not be afraid could sound quite harsh, until we remember who it is who is telling them not to be afraid. He is the first and last, the one who has defeated death by his resurrection. That is why he can tell them to not be afraid. Jesus has dealt with our great enemy and so ultimately we have nothing to fear. He suffered and died for us so that even though we die we will live with him. It's vital that we get the link between what Jesus says about himself in

v8 and what he says to them here in v10 - Jesus is risen so do not be afraid. Back in John 16:33 Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." That's his message to the church in Smyrna and to us!

- **"Be faithful..."** - As we saw in 1:9 Christians are called to "Patiently Endure" in this life because we know that Jesus has won the victory and so if we are in his kingdom then we are on the winning side. Here again we see that Jesus' words to the church are rooted in the gospel. Christ has died and risen so being faithful to him is not foolish. Time and again it will seem foolish to be faithful to Christ when the world is hostile towards us. In these situations we need to remember who it is who calls us to be faithful - Jesus Christ, the first and last, who died and came to life again! Here's our reason to remain faithful.
- **v10-11 - Christ's Promise to the Church**
  - **"Life as your victor's crown"** - The imagery of the victor's crown would have been familiar to the people of Smyrna because of the games and Arena in the city. As with the tree of life in 2:7 this image speaks of the promise of eternal life that God's people will enjoy with him in his perfect new creation (see chs21-22.)
  - **"...will not be hurt at all by the second death."** - The idea of the second death occurs in 20:11-15 where it is depicted as a lake of fire. There we learn that everyone will be raised to life on the final day and judged. Those who's names are not in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire (hell.) Jesus is therefore promising that those who remain faithful to him will not experience hell but instead will be with him enjoying life in God's new creation.

### **Tricky Bits**

- **"In what way were these Jews a Synagogue of Satan?"**
  - Back in John 8:44 Jesus said that the Jews who were opposing him belonged "to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires." Satan is the accuser and the father of lies who stands against God and his people. This means that those who oppose and slander/tell lies about God's people are in a sense children of Satan. This means that even though the Jews of Smyrna claimed to be a Synagogue of God, they were really a Synagogue of Satan because they were opposing and slandering the church of Christ just as the Jews in John 8 opposed and slandered Jesus.
- **"When the Devil puts them in prison to test them is that out of God's control?"**
  - The short answer is "NO!" The reason for saying this is back in v8 - Jesus is the first and last. That means that ultimately he is sovereign over Satan and we see Jesus' sovereignty over Satan three times in v10. First *"the devil will put **some** of you in prison..."* Satan's power is limited, he will only be able to put some of the church in prison. Secondly, *"the devil will put some of you in prison **to test you**..."* Satan will put them in prison to test them in the hope that they will not prove genuine. Yet God also always has a purpose in the suffering of his people. As Stott says, "Our adversary tempts in order to destroy; our Father tests in order to refine." Thirdly, we see God's sovereignty in that *"you will suffer persecution **for ten days**."* The reference to 10 days could refer back to Daniel 1:12-15 when Daniel and his friends were tested for ten days. They were tempted to engage in pagan religion (possibly like the Church at Smyrna). Whether the ten days were literal or symbolic the big point is that this persecution is limited. It will not go on forever, it will only last for a time because Jesus is the first and last and so he is sovereign even over persecution.

## Big Idea

**Following Jesus means suffering for Jesus but we have nothing to fear because Jesus has beaten death and will give his people eternal life.**

## Suggested Areas of Application

- **Persecution** - We cannot get away from the fact that the New Testament tells us that persecution is the norm for Christians. Jesus warned us that "if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." Yet do we really expect persecution? Are we prepared for it? We may not face death or imprisonment for our faith but many of us will face slander. As I write this I have just been into Hall Cross Upper School to help run the Christian Union. I would not be surprised if the Christians who came to that group were being slandered for their faith by their peers. As we are slandered or dismissed as idiots for our faith we need to hear Jesus' words afresh "These are the words of him who is the First and Last, who died and came to life again... Do not be afraid... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown."
- **Spiritual Riches** - As a secondary area of application you may like to focus on the idea of being spiritually rich. We clearly see in v9 that what really matters to Jesus is whether we are spiritually rich rather than materially rich. In the gospels he tells us "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21.) As we talk about money and possessions we must be aware that our church is made up of those who are materially rich and those who are materially poor. Whoever we are Jesus' words challenge us to pursue spiritual riches rather than earthly ones.

## Suggested Bible Study

### **Starter Question**

1. **Think of a time when you have been either slandered, mocked or in some way ill-treated because you are a Christian. What happened and how did you feel?**

*A big theme in this passage is suffering for our faith and how we respond to it. We could start by talking about examples of persecution around the world (e.g. Iraq) but I think it will be a more fruitful study if we start by talking about our own personal experiences even if they are no where near as severe as what we see on our TV screens.*

### **Digging into the Passage (Observation and Interpretation Questions)**

2. **What were the Christians in Smyrna experiencing and what were they going to experience? (v9-10)**

*This is a simple observation question that just involves picking the details out of the passage. The simple answer is that they are being afflicted but it will be useful to tease out the specific details. They are materially poor, they are being slandered and they will experience persecution in that some of them will be imprisoned and possibly even killed for their faith.*

### **3. What does Jesus urge them to do? (v10)**

*Jesus urges them to do 2 things; 'Do not be afraid' and 'Be faithful.' You might want to tease out how telling them to not be afraid is counter-intuitive and could seem harsh. You could also get the group to consider what it would look like for the church at Smyrna to remain faithful?*

### **4. What promises does Jesus make? (v10-11)**

*Jesus promises them eternal life with him. To help the group see this you might want to take the group to ch20-22 to see where these promises are fleshed out.*

### **5. What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? (v8-11)**

*Get the group to pick out both the explicit things that Jesus says about himself in v8 as well as the implicit things that we learn about him in this passage.*

*Explicitly we are told that Jesus is Eternal (see Isaiah 44:6, 48:12 and Revelation 1 for the background context to this phrase.) We are also told that he is the one who died and rose (see 1:18) and thus he is the one who has conquered death by his resurrection.*

*Implicitly we are told that Jesus is all-knowing (because he knows their afflictions and their spiritual riches), he is in control (see his sovereignty in v10), and he is also generous (see his promises in v10-11.)*

*It's really important that the group are clear on what we learn about Jesus in this passage because who Jesus is and what he has done are the big reasons why we need not be afraid and can trust his promises. Having helped the group to see who Jesus is we can then ask the following three vital questions;*

#### **1. Why do we ultimately not need to be afraid of persecution?**

*Jesus is eternal and he conquered death and Satan by his resurrection. This means that even if we are killed for our faith we are safe and secure because Christ has conquered death and so holds the keys to death and life.*

#### **2. Why is it not stupid to remain faithful to Jesus?**

*Again it is because of who Jesus is. He's the risen and eternal victorious king so being on his side might be painful now but ultimately it's worth it!*

#### **3. Why can we trust his promise of eternal life?**

*Again it is all about who Jesus is. He is eternal and he has risen from the dead so he alone can offer eternal life. Christ has got through death and so he will get his people through too!*

### **Applying the Passage (Application Questions)**

#### **6. What sorts of afflictions do you face as a Christian?**

*This question is purposefully quite similar to the starting question. The aim is to bring what we have learnt in the passage into contact with our lives. Although this passage definitely does have applications for our brothers and sisters in places like Iraq and Nigeria let's work really hard to apply it to ourselves first. As a result try and keep the application focused on the afflictions and slander that we actually face. We are unlikely to be imprisoned or killed for our faith but being a Christian may result in slander, alienation or even losing our job. If we have never suffered afflictions or been slandered for our faith then it might be worth asking what this says about our faith because Jesus tells us to expect opposition and persecution if we follow him?*

**7. What in this passage will help and encourage you as you face these afflictions?**

*Having talked about the ways we suffer for being Christians it's really important to apply the truth of what we have learnt to those situations. Open up the discussion and let people share what has encouraged them from this passage. There are no right and wrong answers at this point. We simply want to encourage each other with what we have been learning.*

*It would be good to spend time praying for each other and the different difficulties that we face. It would also be very appropriate to pray for our brothers and sisters who are experiencing greater persecution than us. Perhaps in preparing for this study you could go on the barnabas fund or open doors websites and use their resources to help the group pray.*

## Revelation 2:12-17 - Pergamum

### Context

- *Pergamum*
  - The city was full of temples and altars to all sorts of different Greek and Roman gods. Pergamum was particularly famous for being the centre of 'Emperor Worship' where the Roman Emperor was worshipped as a god. Pergamum was the first place to have a provincial temple in honour of a Roman emperor.
  - All of this would have meant that Pergamum would have been a very difficult and pressurised place to be a Christian. There would have been a great pressure to conform and offer simple sacrifices to the Roman Emperor in order to have a peaceful life. The letter to the church at Pergamum, with its references to "remaining true to my name" and people eating "food sacrificed to idols", fits with what we know of the city from other historical sources.
- *Balaam*
  - Balaam was a prophet who we can read about in Numbers 22-25. Balak was king of Moab and he commissioned Balaam to curse Israel who were about to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land. Of particular relevance is the fact that Balaam devised a scheme whereby the Moabite women who seduce the Israelite men. They invited the Israelite men to come and indulge in sexual immorality and then to sacrifice to the Moabite gods and then eat the sacrificial food that had just been offered to the Moabite gods. As a result "The LORD's anger burned against Israel." (Numbers 25:3.) See the Tricky Bits for an explanation of how this is relevant to the church in Pergamum.

### Structure

- **V12 - A Description of Christ for the Church**
  - **Sharp, double-edged sword** - Back in 1:16 we were told that Jesus had a sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. This suggests that the sharp double-edged sword is Jesus' words. This is confirmed by Ephesians 6:17 which says that the sword of the Spirit is the word of God which we are to use to stand against the Devil's schemes. The image of God's word as a sword has its origin in Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2. In both of these verses the image is used to speak of God coming in judgment on the world because of its sin. As a result the sharp-double-edged sword in Isaiah is a word of judgement. This is particularly relevant to the church at Pergamum because in v16 Jesus warns them that if they do not repent he will "soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." **Jesus is therefore being presented as the Judge** who will come and bring judgment (with his word) on those within the church who do not repent of their idolatry and sexual immorality.
- **V13 - Christ's Commendation of the Church**
  - **"I know where you live..."** - Here is a great encouragement to the church. Jesus does not just know about his people and what they do. He also knows where they live and in this case he knows the hostile environment in which they live.
  - **"You remain true to my name... You did not renounce your faith in me..."** - Jesus commends them for their costly faithfulness to him. They live in a city that is hostile to them, indeed one of their members has been killed for his faith, and yet the church has not renounced their faith in Christ. Though Jesus has things against the church

that require repentance we must not lose sight of the fact that the majority of the church were remaining faithful to Jesus in the toughest of environments.

- **V14-15 - Christ's Complaint against the Church**

- **Food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality** - For a discussion of whether there were actually people following Balaam's teaching in the church at Pergamum see the Tricky Bits section below. The big thing to draw out from these verses is that there were people in the church encouraging Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols and to indulge in sexual immorality. I think that this is what is meant by those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. It seems that the church was under a great pressure to conform with the rest of the pagan society. They would have felt a huge pressure to go along to the pagan temples to offer sacrifices, eat the sacrificial meals and engage in sexual immorality with the pagan temple prostitutes as part of the worship. Against the background of this great external pressure it seems that there were some in the church who were saying that such behaviour was acceptable for Christians. Jesus is clear that this is definitely not acceptable, just as it was unacceptable in the time of Balaam.

- **V16 - Christ's Command to the Church and the Consequence**

- **"Repent... Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."** - Unsurprisingly Jesus' blunt message is that they are to repent otherwise he will come against them in judgment with his word. Notice who Jesus is addressing in this verse. In v15 he seems to be addressing the whole church because he says "...You also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans..." Again in v16 he seems to be addressing the whole church when he says "I will soon come to you." This means that when he says "Repent" at the start of v16 he is speaking to the whole church and not just those involved in the false teaching and the immorality. Jesus seems to be saying that the whole church needs to repent and do something about what is going on. The whole church is to act when there is false teaching and immorality even if it is only a few people who are actually involved. This is backed up by a careful study of Numbers where God tells Moses and the leaders to act even though Moses and the leaders are not necessarily guilty. If the church in Pergamum does not take action then the consequences are clear, Jesus will come in judgment and he "will fight against them (the false teachers and those engaged in the idolatry and immorality) with the sword of my mouth."

- **V17 - Christ's Promise to the Church**

- **Churches** - It is worth noticing that in every letter the phrase "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches" is repeated. This reminds us that each of the letters is not just for the particular named church. These letters are for all the churches and indeed are for everyone who has ears to hear. It is a simple reminder that as we study and read these letters each week we are not to do so as an academic exercise. The Spirit is speaking to us through these letters and we need to listen and respond.
- **Hidden Manna and a White Stone with a New Name** - For a discussion on the meaning of these images see the Tricky Bits below. For now let us remember that all the promises at the end of the letters points forward to different aspects of the New Creation that we get a glimpse of in chs19-22. Here I think (though it is hard to be sure) that the manna and the stone speak of Christians being invited to the Great

Wedding Banquet of the Lamb and therefore speak of the great intimacy that God and his people will enjoy.

### **Tricky Bits**

- ***What does "Where Satan has his throne" mean?***
  - There are many different suggestions offered for what this means. Most likely it is referring to the fact that Pergamum was effectively the Regional Capital of Emperor Worship. It may also refer to the fact that "the cult of Asclepius, the serpent god of healing, was prominent in Pergamum; the serpent symbol of Asclepius also became one of the emblems of the city" (Beale) and this might be a reason for why Pergamum was described as the place where Satan has his throne.
  
- ***Who are Balaam, Balak and the Nicolaitians?***
  - As mentioned in the context Balaam devised the plan of trying to stop Israel by getting the Moabite women to entice the Israelite men to commit sexual immorality, idolatry and then eating the food sacrificed to idols. The result was that God brought judgment on Israel in the form of a plague until Israel repented (see Numbers 25.)
  - It seems very unlikely that there were actually people in Pergamum who were actually following the teaching of Balaam because over 1000 years had passed. Instead it seems more likely that the teaching of the Nicolaitans was very similar to the teaching of Balaam, i.e. the Nicolaitans, like Balaam were encouraging God's people to engage in idolatry and the sexual immorality and food sacrificed to idols that went along with it. My reason for saying this is the use of the word "Likewise" in v15. In other words, Jesus is saying things are just like they were in Balaam's day and so just as in Balaam's day, if God's people do not repent then judgment will come.
  
- ***What is the hidden manna and the white stone?***
  - Almost every commentary offers a different suggestion for what these mean as a result it is hard to say with any great confidence exactly what they mean. Instead I will simply lay out some of the more plausible options. The big thing to remember is that each of the promises in the other letters points forward to the New Creation and so we should expect this promise to do the same.
- ***What is the Hidden Manna?***
  - I think this is slightly easier to pin down than the white stone. I agree with Beale that the manna speaks of the Wedding Supper of the Lamb and the intimacy that there will be between God and his people. In this way 2:17 has a similar message to 2:7.
  - The image of Manna comes from the Israelites in the Wilderness which ties in with the reference to Balaam and Balak who opposed God's people while they were in the Wilderness.
  - The Manna may also be in contrast to the "food sacrificed to idols" that some are currently eating. Those who repent of their participation in idol feasts will be welcomed to the wedding feast of the true God.
  - Throughout apocalyptic literature like Revelation the idea of something being hidden means that it is something that "will be revealed to God's people at the end of time."
- ***What is the White Stone and the New Name?***
  - Some suggest that the image of a white stone is taken from a legal setting where a white stone was cast to say that someone was acquitted whereas a black stone was cast when someone is guilty.

- Others say that stones (and particularly white stones) were used as invitation tickets to special events and feasts. If this is so then the white stone is an invitation to the wedding banquet of the Lamb (19:9) which would fit with the idea of the manna.
- As for the new name, many commentators point out that in 3:12 Jesus promises to write on his people "the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem... and I will also write on them my new name." As a result, Beale argues that "They all refer to the intimate eschatological presence of God and Christ with his people, as expressed most clearly by 22:3–4: "the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall serve him; and they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads"".
  - In other words the promise in 2:17 is that God's people will dwell with God and enjoy the blessing of his intimate presence.

## **Big Idea**

**Hold Firm to Jesus and his truth no matter what is going on inside or outside the church.**

## **Suggested Areas of Application**

- In a society that is increasingly hostile to and intolerant of Christians Jesus calls us to remain faithful to him and not give up our faith.
- Jesus calls his church to take action when we come across false teaching and immorality. As with the church at Ephesus (2:2) we are not to tolerate wickedness but remain faithful to Christ and continue to live lives that are pure and pleasing to him.

## **Suggested Bible Study Questions**

### **Starter Question**

#### **1. What do you think are the biggest threats to the church in Britain today?**

*The church at Pergamum faced external threats in the form of persecution and even death but they also faced the internal threat of false teaching and immorality that had crept in. As a result it would be good to start the study by talking about some of the threats the church in Britain faces today. We do not face the threat of dying for our faith like Antipas, but we do face numerous external and internal threats that we need to take seriously.*

### **Digging into the Passage (Observation and Interpretation Questions)**

#### **2. What does Jesus say is good about this church? (v13)**

*Jesus commends them for remaining faithful to him and not renouncing their faith.*

#### **3. How easy do you think it would have been for them to remain faithful to Jesus?**

*Remaining faithful to Jesus in Pergamum must have been very difficult, scary and costly. They clearly lived in a hostile city as shown by the references to Satan and the martyrdom of Antipas.*

#### **4. What does Jesus say is bad about the church? (v14-15)**

*Try not to get too bogged down in Balaam, Balak and the Nicolaitans. The big thing to see is that there were people encouraging Christians to get involved in idolatry and specifically eating the food sacrificed to idols and the sexual immorality that went along with the idolatry. You might like to go to Numbers 25 to help people see the similarities between what was going on in Numbers and Revelation.*

**5. What is the whole church to do about the problem? What will happen if they do not? (v16)**

*It is important to see that Jesus tells the whole church to repent. If they do not then Jesus will come in judgment on those who are unrepentant of their sin. This would be a good point of the study to draw out the imagery of the sharp double-edged sword and what this tells us about Jesus (see the earlier notes and references to Isaiah.) You might also want to discuss why the whole church was called to repent and not just the individuals involved? What does this tell us about sin and the church? You might also want to discuss what it means for the whole church to repent of something that was only being done by a few?*

**6. What promise does Jesus make to those who repent? How would this encourage them? (v17)**

*Again don't get too bogged down in the precise details. Help people to see how all of the promises in the letters points forward to the New Creation. Get the group to imagine you are part of the church with all the pressures to conform and go along to the temples and the idol feasts. Imagine how encouraging it must have been to read this promise from Jesus that you will one day be with him enjoying his wedding banquet.*

**Applying the Passage (Application Questions)**

**7. What have we learnt about Jesus that is Encouraging?**

*There are many encouragements from this passage that the group might like to dwell on. Firstly Jesus knows where we live and so he knows the difficulties that we face as Christians in an increasingly hostile country. He knows the difficulties and hardships we face at work or with our families. Jesus knows what we are enduring for his sake! The second big encouragement we learn about Jesus is that he is the one who will welcome his people into his kingdom and who will dwell intimately with them and eat with them at his banquet.*

**8. What have we learnt about Jesus that is Challenging?**

*We have been reminded that he sees everything and knows all our sin. What is more we have been reminded of how seriously Jesus takes all sin including the unrepentant sin of his people. I think v14-16 are a stark reminder to us that we should not be fooled into thinking that our sin does not matter because we have put our trust in Christ.*

**9. Think about the different external and internal threats the church faces today. What will it look like for us to remain true to Jesus?**

*This question picks up where we started the study with our starter question. Get the group to recap the different external and internal threats that we face. For each threat get the group to think practically about what it will actually mean to be faithful to Jesus in these difficult situations. What sort of behaviour is called for in each situation?*

## Revelation 2:18-29 - Thyatira

### Context

- *Thyatira* - As with many of the cities in the region, Thyatira's economy was strongly tied to the various pagan temples. This would often mean that if, as a Christian, you were not prepared to engage in the pagan idolatry and immorality that went on at the temple then you would be cut out of business deals and suffer financially as a result.
- *Jezebel* - Jezebel was a Sidonian who became Queen of Israel when she married Ahab. She encouraged Ahab and the rest of Israel to turn away from the LORD to worship Baal - See 1 Kings 16:29-33.
- *Revelation 2-3* - The problem is Thyatira seems to be quite similar to the problem in Pergamum (compare 2:14-15 and 2:20). It is also worth noticing that Jesus seems to be contrasting the church at Ephesus with the church at Thyatira. For example Thyatira are doing more than they did at first (2:19) whereas Ephesus have forsaken their first love and are urged to do the things they did at first (2:5). Similarly Ephesus was praised for not tolerating false teachers (2:2) whereas Thyatira are rebuked for tolerating false teachers and immorality (2:20.) This is a reminder to not read these letters in isolation.

### Structure

- **v18 - A Description of Christ**
  - **Son of God** - Unlike the other descriptions of Christ in chapters 2-3 this description is not found in chapter 1. This description of Jesus as the Son of God makes sense in the context of the letter because in v26-27 Jesus quotes Psalm 2 and applies it to himself and the church. Psalm 2 is all about the kingly authority and judgment that the Father grants to the Son. It therefore makes sense for Jesus to start the Psalm by reminding them that he is the Son of God who has been given all authority and who will judge all wickedness and rebellion against God.
  - **Eyes Like Blazing Fire and Feet Like Burnished Bronze** - This image was found in 1:14-15 and speaks of at least two things. Firstly it reminds us of Jesus' purity, in contrast to the impurity and immorality of some in Thyatira (see 2:20-22) as well as speaking of the fact that as the Son of God he is all knowing and all seeing. As a result he knows all about the wickedness and immorality of this Jezebel figure and her "children."
- **v19 - Christ's Commendation of the Church**
  - **I know your deeds...** - As mentioned in the context section Jesus seems to be comparing this church to the church in Ephesus. Like the Church at Ephesus this church are praised for their service/hard work and their perseverance. Unlike Ephesus the Thyatiran's are praised for their love and the fact that they are doing more than they did at first. This could mean that they were doing more evangelism as an expression of their love for Christ. Whatever it means it shows that Thyatiran's had realised that the Christian life is to be one of progress. This is important for us to see. Before we get onto the faults in the church it is worth considering their strengths. It is also worth asking whether Jesus would commend us for these things? On a personal level it is worth thinking about what you are known for? Am I known for love, faith, service and perseverance? Similarly am I continuing to make progress in my Christian life?

- **v20-21 - Christ's Complaint against the Church**
  - **Tolerate Jezebel...** - In contrast to Ephesus who were intolerant of false teaching and wicked people the church at Thyatira are tolerating a false teacher who is misleading Christians. It seems unlikely that there was actually someone called Jezebel in the church. Instead, as with the reference to Balaam in 2:14 and the later references to Babylon in ch18 it seems that Jesus is using a name from the Old Testament symbolically. In effect Jesus is saying that there was someone in the church at Thyatira who was as dangerous as Jezebel had been because like Jezebel this person was misleading Christians..
  - **Immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols** - It seems that this false teacher was telling Christians that it was perfectly acceptable to go to the temple and to engage in the idolatry and sexual immorality that would have been common place in such pagan temples. It's also worth noticing that this was exactly the same issue as we found at Pergamum last week except for one difference...
  - **I have given her time to repent but she unwilling** - Jesus had in some way already warned this false teacher to repent and they had not. This suggests that the false teaching and immorality might have been going on for longer in Thyatira than in Pergamum because the letter to Pergamum in 2:12-17 seems to be that church's first warning whereas this letter to Thyatira is clearly not their first warning.
- **v22-23 - Christ's Judgment on the Unrepentant**
  - **The Normal Pattern is Broken** - Normally at this point in each letter Jesus would command the church to do something but here he doesn't. He has already told the false teacher and her followers to repent and so instead of issuing a command he warns them that judgment is coming.
  - **The Message of Judgment on the False Teacher** - As Stott observes, it is striking that Jezebel's bed of immorality will become a bed of death. It is also striking that judgment is expressed in terms of her children dying which is what happened to the original Jezebel. It is also worth comparing how this passage on judgment anticipates the fuller picture of judgment spelt out in ch18.
  - **The Hope of Escaping Judgment for those who repent** - Whilst judgment is pronounced on those who commit adultery with Jezebel it is striking that there is a glimmer of hope for them if they repent (see v22.) Here we are reminded what sort of a judge Jesus is. Yes he is holy and just and he hates sin. Yet he is also the one who is slow to anger and abounding in love, and he is the one who wants no one to perish. Thus amidst this message of deserved judgment we must not miss this shaft of undeserved grace being offered to those who will repent.
  - **The Warning of Judgment to the other Churches** - Throughout the letters we have been reminded that these letters are not just for the named church but for all the churches (see the repeated phrase "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches...") Here we see that the judgment that was to come on the unrepentant in Thyatira was going to be a clear warning to all the churches (both there and then and here and now) that Jesus is the Holy and Pure Son of God who's blazing eyes sees everything and who will bring judgment on all wickedness. This means that as we study this passage we need to engage with what it is saying to us. Jesus sees our apparently hidden and unconfessed sins. Through his word he

repeatedly calls us to repent but if we will not then we can be sure that judgment will come.

- **v24 - Christ's Call to the Faithful**

- **No other burden** - These words echo the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 where it says that "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality..."
- **Hold onto what you have...** - To the faithful who have not been misled Jesus' gently urges them simply to keep going. To hold onto the truth and their faith, to keep doing the good things that they are doing even when they feel pressured to compromise and go with the crowd to the temple.

- **v25-29 - Christ's Promise to the Victorious**

- **Authority over the nations...** - Jesus picks up Psalm 2 which is all about how the Son of God has been given authority by God to judge the wicked and rebellious nations. Jesus takes this promise and says that in some way Christians will share in his kingly rule. Exactly what this will mean in practice, and exactly how we will be involved in judging the nations are beyond us this side of eternity. The big thing for us to take away though is that we will share in Jesus' kingly victory with him.
- **The morning star** - There are many suggestions as to what this means but 22:16 and makes it clear that the Morning Star is Jesus. This interpretation is strengthened by Numbers 24:14-20 which speaks of a great future leader of God's people as a star. Jesus is therefore promising himself to his people - what an incredible promise! As we read ch20-22 we see that the best thing about the New Creation is not our new physical bodies or the new physical creation (those these will be amazing). Instead the best thing about the new creation is that we will be with Jesus and he will be with us - you can't get better than that!

### **Tricky Bits**

- ***What are Satan's so-called deep secrets?***

- It could be that the false teacher was passing off their teaching and the accompanying immorality as "the deep things of God." In other words they could have been presenting their teaching as "advanced Christian teaching" so that if the gospel was the A-B-C, then their teaching was the D-E-F. Jesus, who's eyes are like blazing fire, sees this teaching for exactly what it really is - Satanic. If God wants his people to be pure then we can be sure that the Devil wants to cause the church to be impure. As a result we should not see false teaching as harmless. Jesus says that ultimately it comes from Satan and it will lead to judgment.

### **Big Idea**

**Jesus is the Son of God and Holy Judge who promises that everyone who repents of their sin will share in his victory.**

## **Suggested Areas of Application**

- **Jesus expects his people to make progress** - As you look at the good things in the church it would be well worth taking the time to dwell on the fact that Jesus praises them for doing more than they did at first. It raises questions like;
  - Am I progressing in my faith?
  - Is my behaviour changing to become more like Jesus?
  - Are there areas of my life where I feel like I am making no progress?
  - How can we help each other to be making progress in our individual Christian lives?
  - Are we making progress as a church and as a small group? As they are mentioned in the passage, why not think specifically about love, faith, service and perseverance.
- **Jesus sees all our sin even if other people don't** - One of the big things we learn about Jesus in this passage is that as the Son of God he is the judge who cannot tolerate wickedness even when it is found in his people. We all have dark and murky areas of our lives that we keep out of view from others... yet Jesus sees these areas. The clear application from this passage is to repent (not just confess) and to turn to Christ for forgiveness and the help to change.
- **Jesus urges us to keep going and stay pure no matter what is going on around us** - Like the Thyatirans we can feel like we are surrounded by immorality and under great pressure to go with the flow. Jesus urges us to stay pure and faithful to him. As small groups let's encourage each other to repent of our sin and live pure lives for Jesus. When we are finding this particularly difficult it's great to have a small group that can remind us of Jesus' great promises to those who are victorious.

## **Suggested Bible Study**

### **Starter Question**

1. **What is the best promise that someone has ever made to you? How did it change the way you behaved?**

*This question is designed to get everyone talking and sharing and there are clearly no right or wrong answers. The question will hopefully help to set us up to study this passage where Jesus will make a great promise to those who hold on and remain pure for him.*

### **Digging into the Passage**

2. **What do we learn about Jesus in these verses?**

*Encourage the group to go through the whole passage and to pick up whatever they find. It doesn't matter if they don't understand something, at this stage we just want to be seeing what the passage says. Hopefully the group should pick out things like;*

- *Jesus is the Son of God (v18)*
- *Eyes like blazing fire = purity and all-seeing (v18)*
- *Feet like burnished bronze = purity (v18)*
- *Loves it when his church are loving, faithful, serving, persevering and growing (v19)*
- *Hates false teaching and immorality in his people (v20-21)*
- *Gives us time to repent of our sins (v21)*
- *Will bring judgment on those who refuse to repent (v22-23)*
- *Searches hearts and minds and will repay each according to their deeds (v23)*
- *Calls his faithful people to hold on (v24-25)*
- *Makes promises to his people (v26-28)*
- *Is the morning star (v28.)*

### **3. What do we learn about the church in these verses?**

Again this is a general question that hopefully anyone can have a go at answering by simply reading the passage. If you have a large group then you might like to tackle this question and/or the previous question in smaller groups and then get the groups to feed back what they have learnt. Hopefully the groups should see some of the following things about the church;

- Praised for love, faith, service and perseverance (v19)
- Making progress (v19)
- Tolerates false teaching, sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (v20)

### **4. What does Jesus tell the different people in the church to do?**

To those engaged in the false teaching and immorality he calls on them to repent before it is too late (v22.)

To those who have not engaged in the false teaching and immorality he urges them to hold on to what they have. You might like to spend some time teasing out what this would mean and why they would have found this so hard.

### **5. What Promises does Jesus make?**

As always the details can be a bit tricky so try and help the group not to get too bogged down in the details. Remember that all the promises Jesus makes touch on something of the blessings of the new creation. Here we see that Jesus is promising that we will share in his victory and rule (v26-27) and that also he will give himself to us (v28 - you may need to go to ch22 to make this clear.) At this point you might like to get the group to think about how the promises that Jesus made would have spurred the church on to remain faithful to Christ.

### **Applying the Passage**

#### **6. Jesus praises the church for making progress in v19. What do you think it looks like for you to make progress in your Christian life?**

Here is where things get practical. Get the group to really tease out what it looks like to make progress as a Christian. Is it simply about going to church and home group regularly? Is it just about serving more? Whilst progress will inevitably be seen in what we do, there will also be a change in our hearts that is part of making progress as Christians.

#### **7. How can we help each other to continue to make progress in the Christian life?**

As a small group we are to spur one another on to love and good deeds so it is worth spending a bit of time thinking practically about how we can help each other to make progress.

#### **8. In these verses Jesus calls us to repent of all our sin (even the hidden stuff) and to then remain pure and faithful to him. How can we help each other to do this?**

It's very unlikely that group members are going to openly confess their hidden sins but hopefully we can still talk about ways that we can encourage each other to remain pure and faithful for Christ. One way from the passage would be to remind each other both of Christ's warning of judgment but also his amazing promises.

## Revelation 3:1-6 - Sardis

### Context

- *Sardis*
  - The city had a distinguished past as it had been the capital of the old kingdom of Lydia. After several invasions and an earthquake it had been rebuilt by the Emperor Tiberius but it never regained its former glory. Beale sees similarities between the city and the church in that "Just as the city in general was living off a former but no longer existing fame, so the same attitude had infected the church."
  - The city had also been captured twice, first by Cyrus in 549BC and then by Antiochus in 218BC. In both cases this was due to the slackness and complacency of the city. Just as the city defenders had needed to wake up and see the danger that they were in, so now the church needs to wake up and act before it is too late.
- *Daniel 12*
  - This chapter of Daniel contains many themes found in this letter.
    - Firstly, in Daniel 12 the saints are referred to as those who "will shine like the brightness of the heavens" (12:3) and they "will be purified, made spotless and refined... (12:10.) This is taken up in Revelation by the repeated references to the saints being "dressed in white" (3:5, see also 14:1-9.)
    - Secondly, Daniel 12 refers to God's people as "everyone whose name is found in the book" (12:1) and as a result these people will be delivered. This image is picked up in Revelation 3:5 and later in 20:15.
- *Matthew 10:32-39*
  - In Revelation 3:5 Jesus promises those who overcome that he "will acknowledge that name before before my God and his angels." This promise echoes Jesus' promise in Matthew 10:32-39. In Matthew 10:32-39 this promise of acknowledgement is made to those who will acknowledge Jesus before others. This could help us to understand what was wrong with this dying church and what it means to be victorious. Could it be that the majority of the church in Sardis had stopped acknowledging people before others? In other words had they stopped standing up and speaking out for Christ?
- *Revelation 14:1-9*
  - Revelation 14:1-9 helps us to understand what Jesus means by Christians soiling their clothes. In Revelation 14:4 the same greek word that is translated "soiled" in 3:4 is translated "defiled". In Revelation 14 soiling/defiling is linked to idolatry (see 14:9) and the accompanying spiritual adultery and immorality that went with this (see 14:4, 8.) This begins to help us get a sense of what was wrong in Sardis. It seems that the vast majority were just going with the idolatrous and immoral flow of society. This would fit with the idea that they were also not prepared to stand up and speak out for Jesus.

### Structure

- *v1a - Who is Jesus?*
  - **"Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."** From 1:4 we know that the seven spirits are the Holy Spirit and from 1:20 we know that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. For now let's not get bogged down in whether churches have guardian angels or not. In broad terms Jesus is telling us that he holds the Holy Spirit and the churches in his hands. Jesus therefore holds the

dying church and the life-giving Spirit that the church needs. Jesus therefore not only tells them what to do, he also can give them the Spirit that they need in order to "Wake Up, strengthen and repent" as he has commanded.

- **v1b - What does Jesus know about the church?**

- **"I know your deeds..."** - When Jesus used this phrase in the letters to Ephesus and Thyatira he used it in a positive way (see 2:2 and 2:19) but in this letter he uses it negatively.
- **"...You have a Reputation for being Alive..."** - This church had a good reputation. It was known for being alive and active. Other churches would have looked at Sardis and said, "They're a good church, they're doing all right."
- **"... But you are dead."** - They may have a reputation for being alive but in reality they are dead (v1), sleeping (v2), dying (v2) and soiled (v4.) This is a church in great danger, the picture is of someone lying in their own filth about to die in their sleep. Alternatively they are like someone who has gone to bed but left the front door unlocked and so it is only a matter of time before the burglars come (v3.)
- **No mention of False Teaching or Persecution** - What is so striking is that there is no mention of any false teachers or persecution (see Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira.) Everything seems relatively comfortable for them. The church at Sardis seems to have lived quite a sheltered life and yet they were in a perilous state. I wonder whether this makes this letter particularly relevant to a church like ours? As a church we live a pretty comfortable and sheltered life. Around the town we probably have a reputation for being alive and relatively big. The danger is that despite our reputation we could be a dying church. As Morris says, "The temptation for the sheltered church is always to take things easy, and they readily become slack."
- **What was wrong with them?** It is hard to say for certain but two details in v4-5 might help us to get a sense of why Jesus said their "deeds were unfinished in the sight of my God."
  - **Soiled Clothes** - In v4 it says that there are some who have not soiled their clothes. The implication from this is that there were many who had indeed soiled their clothes. From Revelation 14 we see that this is an image of going with the idolatrous and immoral flow of society rather than remaining spiritually pure for Christ. Whereas other churches were pressured into idolatry and immorality by a hostile society around them, it seems that the church at Sardis had ended up soiling themselves because life was so easy and comfortable - what a warning to us as Christians in Britain with our relatively comfortable lives.
  - **"Acknowledge"** - In v5 Jesus promises to acknowledge the victorious before his Father and his Father's angels. From Matthew 10 we see that Jesus makes this promise to those who will acknowledge Jesus before other people now in this life. Could it be that the church at Sardis' deeds were incomplete because they had stopped acknowledging Jesus? Had they stopped standing up and being counted for Christ? Had they stopped trying to speak for Christ? Were they embarrassed about Jesus for fear that being known as a Christian would disrupt their comfortable lives? If so then again this is a challenge to us as Christians in 21st century Britain.

- **v2-3a - What does Jesus Command the Church to do?**
  - **"Wake Up!"** - This has the sense of be watchful and alert. They had become spiritually lethargic and perhaps they had become unaware of just how far they had drifted and just how much like the surrounding pagan culture they had become. If they don't wake up then Jesus will come in unexpected judgment and catch them by surprise.
  - **"Strengthen what remains and is about to die"** - This is what it will mean for them to wake up. There are a few embers still glowing in the fire but if they don't quickly fan them into flames then the fire and light of this church will die out.
  - **"Remember... what you have received and heard... Hold it fast/Obey... Repent"** - I doubt that this is simply referring to the gospel of Christ dying for their sins. Instead I think it probably also includes the response of radical change that is to come with a profession of faith in Christ. Christ has called his bride to remain pure and faithful to him. He has called them to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him which will include acknowledging him before others (see Matthew 10:32-39.) Ultimately they need to repent and obey both what Jesus is saying in this letter and what he has said to them already through the gospel teaching that they have received. We are reminded that the Christian life is one of ongoing repentance and obedience.
- **v3b - What is Jesus' warning to the church?**
  - **Jesus will come in judgment like a thief in the night.** This could be referring to his coming in final judgment but may be referring to a specific judgment that would imminently fall on the church in Sardis if they did not repent. Either way his coming in judgment will be unexpected.
- **v4-5 - What does Jesus promise to those who are worthy and overcome?**
  - **"They will walk with me..."** - As with many of the promises in the rest of the letters this promise captures the intimacy that we will have with Christ in the new creation. It is another way of saying, that God "himself will be with them and be their God."
  - **"... Will be dressed in white"** - This could symbolise purity, festivity or victory. All these are possible but it also probably has a sense of being justified. In 7:14 God's people are dressed in white robes that they have washed in the blood of the lamb. Consider the images of God dwelling with his people in ch7 it seems highly likely that we should use ch7 to help us interpret the imagery of white robes here in ch3.
  - **" I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life..."** - This idea of the book of life in which the names of God's people are recorded is taken from Daniel 12 and occurs again in ch20. Here Christ is assuring his people that their salvation is safe and secure. The names of the victorious who are worthy are written in the book and so they are safe and secure.
  - **"... But will acknowledge them before my Father and his angels."** - As already mentioned the key background text for this reference is Matthew 10:32-39. Jesus makes it clear that he expects his people to take up their cross and to publicly acknowledge that they are his people. In return he will not disown them before his God on judgment day. This promise also comes with an implied warning - "But

whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my father in heaven." (Matthew 10:33.)

### **Tricky Bits**

- ***In what sense were their "deeds unfinished in the sight of my God?" (v2)***
  - The word "unfinished" could also be translated "fulfilled". The big contrast is between what people think about the church and what God thinks about the church. People think that the church is doing well but in contrast God sees the churches deeds and insufficient and unsatisfactory for a church that professes to be God's people. The reality of the church does not live up to the reputation of the church!
- ***What does Jesus mean by saying "for they are worthy"? (v4)***
  - This does not mean that these people have done something to earn their white robes/ justification. Instead it means that they have not done anything to forfeit their justification which was a free gift from Christ.
- ***When Jesus says that he "will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life" is he implying that it is possible for a Christian to lose their salvation? (v5)***
  - It is unlikely that this is in mind because none of the other promises to the overcomer include such an implicit threat that you might lose your salvation. The point that is being made is to reassure faithful believers that their salvation is assured.

### **Big Idea**

**What Jesus knows about our true spiritual health matters more than what other people think about us**

### **Suggested Areas of Application**

- Our reputation as Christians, a small group and as a church counts for nothing if it is not backed up by reality.
- Have we fallen asleep in our Christian lives? If so then Jesus is clear, we need to wake up and repent fast!
- Like the church at Sardis we live in a society where it is still relatively comfortable for us to be Christians. Are we, like them, in danger of going with the flow of society and soiling our clothes?

### **Suggested Bible Study**

#### **Starter Questions**

**1. What are some of the signs that someone is alive and healthy?**

**2. What are some of the signs that a church is alive and healthy?**

*As we discussed at the Pit Stop when we looked at these verses there are various ways that you could start this study. Here one was possible way to get the study started that would help to raise the issue of what makes a church a living and healthy church.*

## **Digging into the Passage**

### **3. What do we learn about Jesus in this passage?**

- v1 - *We learn that he holds the Holy Spirit and the churches. You might like to get the group to think about why he tells this specific church these specific details about himself?*
- v1-2 - *He knows what they are really like and he's not impressed.*
- v2-3 - *He takes spiritual lethargy and immorality incredibly serious!*
- v3 - *He will come in unexpected judgment like a thief in the night if they don't repent.*
- v4-5 - *He makes great promises to those who overcome. They will be perfect and will dwell with him enjoying the fullness of their salvation.*

### **4. What bad things do we learn about the church?**

- v1-2 *There is a big discrepancy between their reputation and the reality. People think they are alive but in reality they are spiritually asleep and endanger of dying.*
- v4 - *The majority have soiled their clothes - see Revelation 14 for how this is probably referring to idolatry and immorality.*
- v5 - *It seems from inference that the majority of the church had stopped acknowledging Jesus publicly - See Matthew 10:32-39 to help.*

### **5. What good things do we learn about the church?**

- v4 - *There are at least some who have remained faithful to Christ*

### **6. What does Jesus tell the church to do?**

- *Wake up... strengthen what remains, remember, hold it fast and repent. The key here is repentance. To realise that they have been spiritually asleep and on the verge of death and with the Spirit's help to turn things around fast.*

### **7. What promises does Jesus make to the church?**

- v3 - *He promises to come in judgment if they don't wake up*
- v5 - *Positively he promises those who overcome that they will dwell with him as his perfectly justified and purified people.*

## **Applying the Passage**

### **8. What do you think it would have actually looked like for them to hold fast to what they had heard and repent?**

*The danger with this passage is that everything is left very general. Get the group to think clearly about the problem in the church and therefore what their repentance needed to actually involve. Try and be as specific as possible.*

### **9. When do we find it hardest to acknowledge Jesus before others?**

*It seems that they had become unwilling to stand up for Jesus. Perhaps this was because they feared that such a stand would risk the comfortable existence that they had as Christians in Sardis. Why not spend some time exploring the situations that we find it hardest to publicly acknowledge Jesus? Why do we find it so difficult in these particular situations? As always be prepared to lead if others are quiet. Having spent time discussing this the next question is designed to help us by focusing on Jesus as we seek to acknowledge him.*

## **10. Think about we have learned about Jesus.**

### **1. What is encouraging to us?**

*There are several possible encouragements that could help us. For example Jesus holds the Spirit and the Churches. Jesus holds the Spirit, and that is exactly what we need as Christians and as a church if we are to be spiritually alive churches who boldly acknowledge Jesus before others.*

### **2. What is challenging to us?**

*Jesus knows what we are really like. Our reputation counts for nothing if its not backed up by reality. Jesus sees everything, and he will judge everything. Here is out motivation to wake up!*

## Revelation 3:7-13 - Philadelphia

### Context

- *What is the Old Testament background to the "Key of David"? (Isaiah 22:20-24 and 2 Samuel 7:5-16, see also Revelation 1:18.)*
  - In 2 Samuel 7 God promised David that God would build him and everlasting house/kingdom. This would suggest that the reference to the Keys of David is a reference to the keys of the Kingdom. This is backed up by Isaiah 22 where Eliakim is said to be given the Keys of the House of David. Similarly in Revelation 1:18 Jesus has the keys are of Death and Hades which speaks of Jesus' control over salvation. It is he who determines who will enter his kingdom.
- *What is an "Open Door" in the rest of the New Testament? (1 Corinthians 16:9, 2 Corinthians 2:12 and Colossians 4:3-4)*
  - Throughout the New Testament the image of an open door speaks of an opportunity for gospel proclamation and people being saved. This is important to bear in mind as we seek to understand what Jesus is saying in v8.
- *What does the Temple signify in the rest of Revelation? (21:22-22:5 and 7:15-17)*
  - The temple is the dwelling place of God with his people. It is striking that in ch21-22 we are told that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem because "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are it's temple" (21:22). This helps us to see that the promises in 3:12 are all to do with how God will intimately dwell with his people and they with him for eternity.

### Structure

- **v7 - Who is Jesus?**
  - **Holy and true** - This description is not explicitly found in ch1 (unlike many of the other descriptions in the letter) yet it conveys the same sense as 1:5 where Jesus is described as "the faithful witness." Jesus remained faithful and true to his Father throughout his earthly life and ministry despite strong opposition. He was faithful even to death and one of the repeated themes through Revelation is that he therefore calls his people to faithful witnesses to him even to the point of death. It is striking that the Philadelphians are repeatedly described as faithful witnesses to Jesus (see v9 and 10.)
  - **Holds the Key of David** - As mentioned in the Context section this refers to Jesus as the king who has the keys of the kingdom. He has power over life, death and salvation.
- **v8, 10 - What does Jesus Know about the Church?**
  - **I know your deeds** - The striking thing about this letter is that Jesus has nothing negative to say about this church. When Jesus told the church at Sardis that he knew their deeds it was not good news. In contrast when he says that he knows the deeds of the Philadelphians it is good news. It's worth quickly noting a few details that Jesus mentions.
    - **"Kept my word" (v8) and "Kept my command to patiently endure" (v10)** - The church has remained faithful to Jesus despite strong opposition from local Jews (see v9). They have patiently endured (see 1:9) which is a key theme and application of the letter.

- **"Not denied my name" (v8)** - In a hostile context where the local Jews were causing them trouble because of their faithfulness to Jesus it must have been very tempting to deny Jesus or at least go quiet about Jesus. Despite the abuse they are getting they are still proudly standing up and being known as Jesus' people.
- **"...you have little strength" (v8)** - This really makes their deeds amazing. This is not a large strong church like Ephesus. This is a small, weak and seemingly insignificant church and yet unlike several of the others (again compare them to Sardis) they are remaining faithful to Jesus. It's worth dwelling on the stand out fact that he has nothing bad to say about them!
- **v11 - What does Jesus Command the Church to do?**
  - **"Hold onto what you have" (v11)** - Unlike almost all the other churches (except Smyrna - in fact why not reread Smyrna and see the similarities with Philadelphia) there is nothing that calls them to repent of. He simply tells them to hold onto what they have. What does this mean? It could be translated "hold fast" or "hold firm" and so it seems that Jesus is telling them to keep doing what they are already doing - remaining faithful to him!
- **v9-10, 12 - What does Jesus Promise the Church?**
  - The letter is full of lots of great promises to the church;
    - **"I will make the Jews come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you." (v9)**
      - As in 2:9 the local Jews are referred to as a synagogue of Satan rather than a Synagogue of God. They claimed to be Jews (God's people) but their persecution and slander of Christians prove that they are not. Instead Jesus says that they are liars. What were these lies? They were claiming that they were God's people and it seems from Jesus' promise that they will come and "acknowledge that I have loved you" that they were also claiming that the Christians were not really God's people. In short the Jews were claiming to be the people who were in God's kingdom when in reality it is the Christians who are the true inhabitants of the kingdom.
      - What does Jesus mean when he says that he will "make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you?" At first this sounds like Jesus will force the Jews to do this but Beale makes the point that the phrase "fall down" is used throughout Revelation and always speaks of a voluntary action. So Jesus is saying that the Jews will come to voluntarily recognise that Christians really are God's people. Many commentators see this as a reference to salvation because (as we said in the context section) talk of an open door in the New Testament is very often about an opportunity for evangelism and people coming to salvation. If this is true then when we take v8-9 together we see that Jesus is saying that there is a great opportunity for evangelism (the open door in v8) and that the result of this evangelism will be the salvation of some of the church's greatest persecutors, the Jews (v9.)
  - **"I will also keep you from the hour of trial..." (v10)**
    - Some sort of hour of difficulty and trial is coming and Jesus promises that he will keep the church safe through this hour because they have been faithful to him and have patiently endured.

- **"The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God" (v12)**
  - As we said in the context section the temple in Revelation signifies the intimate dwelling of God with his people. A pillar would be crucial to the structure of a temple building and so it would be unmovable. Likewise Jesus is promising that God's people will always dwell with him and will never leave his presence (v12.)
- **"I will write on them the name..." (v12)**
  - Jesus will write several names on them, (God's name, his new name and the name of the new Jerusalem) all these signify how Christians will be eternally identified with Jesus. He will be their God and they will be his people!

### **Tricky Bits**

- **What is meant by the "hour of trial?" (v10)**
  - This could be referring to final judgment but could also be referring to something more immediate (see similar references in 2:10 and 2:22) and more local (see Acts 11:28 for how a similar phrase can simply refer to the known world or the Roman Empire.) On balance I would lean towards this not being end time judgment because of the reference to "hour" which denotes something that lasts for a fixed time and then ends and also because of the references to "trial" and "test" which again suggests something temporary.
  - However you interpret this hour of trial the big point is clear - these Christians don't need to worry about it.
- **When Jesus tells them to "Hold onto what you have, so that no one will take your crown" is he implying that Christians can lose their salvation? (v11)**
  - This concern is similar to the one from 3:5 in the last study. Again Jesus' big point is to emphasise that his people are to hold on and keep going as Christians. If they continue to persevere then a great reward awaits them.

### **Big Idea**

**Jesus praises them for their faithful witness and promises them that if they keep going they will always be with him.**

### **Suggested Areas of Application**

- Jesus prizes faithfulness over size and strength
- Jesus calls us to patiently endure but that does not mean we are to just huddle together and stay silent.

## **Suggested Bible Study**

### **Starter Question**

- 1. Of all the churches that we have met so far, which one would you want to belong to and why?**

*The idea behind this question is to people thinking about what makes a good church and what makes a bad church. Would we rather belong to a Smyrna where they are afflicted and poor but Jesus does not really have anything against them? Or would we rather be part of a church like Ephesus that is big and impressive. Talking about this should set the scene for our study of the letter to the church at Philadelphia in which Jesus only has positive things to say about the church even though it is weak and persecuted.*

### **Digging into the Passage**

- 2. What do we learn about Jesus? (particularly in v7-8)**

*Here we want to particularly focus on the fact that Jesus holds the keys of the kingdom/ salvation and as a result he has opened the doors of the kingdom/salvation. This is both a reassurance to the Christians but also reminding them that there is a great opportunity for gospel proclamation and seeing people come to salvation. To help the group see this you might want to go back to Revelation 1:18 as well as 2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 22.*

- 3. What does Jesus know about the church? (v8-10)**

*Jesus knows their deeds and he is full of praise. He knows that even though they are weak and have been opposed by the Jews they have been faithful and continued to stand as witnesses for Jesus.*

- 4. What does Jesus tell the church to do? (v11)**

*Make sure that the group see that unlike many of the other churches Jesus does not command this church to repent. Instead he simply calls them to hold onto what they have. He calls them to patiently endure which is a repeated application through the letter of Revelation.*

- 5. What promises does Jesus make to the church? (v9-12)**

*He promises that, because he has opened the door of salvation even some of their opponents will be saved (v9.)*

*He also promises that he will keep them safe through this coming trial (v10)*

*He promises that he is coming soon (v11)*

*He promises that he will make them a pillar and write various names on them (v12.) Try to help the group not get too bogged down in the details. Use Revelation 21-22 to show how this is about God dwelling with his people for eternity.*

### **Applying the Passage**

- 6. How would this letter have encouraged them to keep going for Jesus?**

*Get the group to reflect on what it must have been like to be this small, weak and maligned church. Imagine how tough it must have been to remain faithful to Jesus day after day when the Jews were slandering you. What encouragement it must have been to receive this letter full of praise and wonderful promises. Think about how each of the promises would have specifically encouraged them.*

**7. When do we find it hard to keep on being faithful witnesses for Jesus?**

*Perhaps there are times when we feel small and slandered like the church at Philadelphia. Try and think about situations where we find it hard to remain faithful and to stand up and be known as a Christian.*

**8. How does this passage encourage us to keep being faithful witnesses for Jesus?**

*This question should flow on naturally from the previous question. Try and have particular and specific situations in mind and apply the encouragements of this passage to those situations that we actually face.*

<b>Church</b>	<b>Christ - "These are the words of him who..."</b>	<b>Commendation - "I know your..."</b>	<b>Complaint - "I have this against you..."</b>	<b>Command</b>	<b>Promise - "To the one who is victorious I will give..."</b>
<b>Ephesus (2:1-7)</b>					
<b>Smyrna</b>					
<b>Pergamum</b>					
<b>Thyatira</b>					
<b>Sardis</b>					
<b>Philadelphia</b>					
<b>Laodicea</b>					