

# REVELATION: WEEK 1

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## **Introduction**

The last time I heard the book of Revelation mentioned was in a podcast about a basketball coach who was sued by a family for the coach's cult-like, creepy mind control influence on their child. The coach was a fundamentalist Christian inspired by his church's interpretation of the book of Revelation. The story of people and churches reading Revelation is full of these types of anecdotes. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, barely made it into the Bible at all, and ever since the early church councils agreed to keep it, it's been causing trouble.

Nietzsche is said to have called Revelation "the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history," and George Bernard Shaw is said to have somewhat more gently called it "the curious record of the visions of a drug addict."

Readings of Revelation have helped support extensive campaigns of religion violence. They've been behind innumerable false predictions of the end of the world, paranoid slander of various religious and secular leaders, and loads of bad Christian art and fiction. It's been said that most Bible-readers don't read Revelation and the ones who do, well, we wish they wouldn't.

So why read Revelation at all, and why read it together during our 40 Days of Faith? Well, with just a little background information and guidance, it can be pretty fun. Revelation is written in a genre called apocalyptic literature that was quite popular during its time and again in ours. Apocalypse literally means "revelation." Using vivid symbols and poetry, apocalyptic literature tries to reveal important things about the present and the future that we might otherwise miss. A little bit like zombie thrillers or science fiction or fantasy, apocalyptic uses unconventional, non-literal writing to grip our imaginations and stir our souls.

Additionally, I think Revelation has just a ton of contemporary relevance. It was originally written to people trying to follow Jesus as residents of a Roman Empire, whose culture and leaders alternatively shaped and seduced and threatened them. Revelation tells its readers that their fractured world doesn't offer the only set of terms to live by. God's children can have a better future and a better present than what's available by just going with the flow.

Those of us who live in the contemporary United States live in one of the only nations whose power and good news-propaganda eclipse that of the ancient Roman Empire. More and more, we live in

times where this is unmasked as hollow and fractured. Perhaps we wonder how to live our lives and face our eventual deaths with more courage, hope, and resistance. If so, Revelation helps lead the way.

Each weekday we'll present you with a different passage, in the New Revised Standard Version, followed by the three sections below. On weekends, you can catch up on a missed day, review a favorite passage, or skip the guide all together.

- **Points of Interest** – a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren't meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself.
- **Spiritual Exercise** – each week, there will be a different daily spiritual exercise to try, inspired by the week's passages.
- **A Direction for Prayer** – there will also be a prompt for prayer that you can use. These invitations focus on the prayers for others we encourage you to try during this season:
  - *For your six:* Consider six of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don't seem to have much of a direct connection to God, but for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
  - *For your church or city:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community?
  - *For our city:* What does the passage say about or to our entire city?

The Daily Bible Guide, while it can certainly be a standalone product, is designed to be one component of a bigger package called 40 Days of Faith – a six-week faith experiment that includes sermons, small group discussions, further prayer exercises, and more. You can learn more about the full 40 Days of Faith in this year's User Manual, available on the campus and at the website of Reservoir Church. And the guide itself is available in various forms: paper, blog, and podcast. Look online at [www.reservoirchurch.org/40days](http://www.reservoirchurch.org/40days).

One more note before we begin. As the guide isn't a commentary or academic document, it's not filled with footnotes, but the following commentaries and books have helped shape my reading and notes on Revelation. Thanks and credit to these resources:

*Reading Revelation Responsibly* by Michael Gorman, *Unveiling Empire* by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Breaking the Code* by Bruce Metzger, *The Apocalypse* by Charles Talbert, and *Reversed Thunder* by Eugene Peterson. If you wanted to read just one book about Revelation, Gorman's would be it.

## Monday, February 19

### Revelation 1:1-8

<sup>1</sup>The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup>who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

<sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.

<sup>4</sup>John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

<sup>7</sup>Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

<sup>8</sup>“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

### Points of Interest

- “The revelation of Jesus Christ” – The first two verses are a title to the book and tell us what genre we’re in – revelation, or literally, apocalypse. We hear that word and think of the destruction of the world, or at least the end of the world as we know it. But the Greek word for this literally means “uncovering” or “revealing.” Apocalyptic literature was an enormously popular form of Jewish spiritual writing in the first century A.D. and in the few centuries preceding. As Babylonian, then Persian, then Greek, and then Roman empires dominated the known world, Jewish writers – including first century followers of Jesus – kept returning to symbols, imagery and poetry to try to pull back the curtain on this known world and see what God might be up to.
- “prophecy” – John’s writing is also prophetic. Prophecy is a timely word of comfort or challenge from God. It’s often about the present as much or more than the future.
- “John” – Tradition holds that he is the disciple of Jesus that also wrote the gospel of John and the three letters of John in the Bible, but we don’t know that this is true.
- “from him who is and who was and who is to come” – This is a rich statement about God’s lifespan through all time, maybe even outside of time. God is alive now, always has been and always will be. It’s also an indication of the different time spans in which we can understand Revelation. It’s partly a book about the future end of history as we know it, but probably less so than many modern readers have imagined. Revelation isn’t some kind of

codebook for our geopolitical future, as some have imagined it to be. It's also partly a book about the past. Revelation cites Old Testament scripture exhaustively and can be read as a coded story about followers of Jesus surviving and thriving under the Roman Empire. We can also read Revelation as providing timely insights into our present. Revelation gives us poetic language and imagery to reflect on the nature of God, evil, history, and more. It also gives us insight into following Jesus while living within a corrupt, bankrupt, unjust human culture and empire.

- “from the seven spirits who are before his throne” – the seven spirits are most likely a poetic description of the Holy Spirit, imagined in angelic terms. There may be roots in Isaiah 11, where the Spirit of God is described with seven qualities.
- “ruler of the kings of the earth... made us to be a kingdom” – In John’s praise of Jesus, he gives us one of the first anti-imperial encouragements for followers of Jesus. Jesus – not Rome’s Caesar or our president or anyone else – has authority over all the kings of the earth. And followers of Jesus are being shaped into a kingdom – a people or family of God who are loved and free, and available to serve God’s good purposes in our times.
- “He is coming with the clouds... the tribes of the earth will wail” – Jesus coming with or on the clouds is a metaphorical image drawn from the late Old Testament book of Daniel. It tells us Jesus is here with us, or he’s coming soon. While Jesus famously brings good news, apparently some people – those who pierced him for sure – will have some different emotions, some reckoning when they next see him.
- “the Alpha and the Omega” – the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The God who lives within and outside of all time – present, past, and future, is the beginning and the end and everything in between.

## **Spiritual Exercise**

Revelation is presented as a word from Jesus, spoken by the Spirit of God, to followers of Jesus. Seven churches, representing churches all around the world, are also told to listen to what the Spirit is saying. So our first week’s spiritual exercises are about listening. What might the Spirit of God be saying to you through today’s passage? Has anything struck your mind or heart? Looking back over the last 24 hours – yours highs and lows, joy or sorrow, presence or distraction, anxiety or peace – has the Spirit of God spoken to you through your life or through any other person? Pay attention for a moment, listen, and ask God how you can respond to whatever comes to mind.

## **A Direction for Prayer**

As you begin the 40 Days of faith, pray that you and your church are encouraged by an experience of Jesus with you and by a fresh word from Jesus to you.

## Tuesday, February 20

### Revelation 1:9-20

<sup>9</sup>I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup>saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

<sup>12</sup>Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup>and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. <sup>14</sup>His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, <sup>15</sup>his feet were like burnished bronze, refined

as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. <sup>16</sup>In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

<sup>17</sup>When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, <sup>18</sup>and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. <sup>19</sup>Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. <sup>20</sup>As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

### Points of Interest

- "Patmos" – a Mediterranean island, off the Western coast of Asia (modern-day Turkey). John reports being exiled there for his faith leadership. Persecution of Christians by Rome was less common in the first century, but many scholars think there may have been persecution in the 90s under the emperor Domitian. Revelation likely was written then.
- "in the spirit" – In writing Revelation, John reports both auditory and visionary hallucinations – the Spirit of God communicating to him vividly through his imagination. Yet the whole book is also an impressive work of literary genius. John makes exhaustive and creative reference to Hebrew scripture and other apocalyptic literature outside the Bible. However much of Revelation came into John's imagination in prayer, he also worked out the details of his writing carefully with a small library of scrolls on hand.
- "the seven churches" – The order of these seven churches represents the order a messenger would have travelled to them all after taking a boat from Patmos to the mainland. The number seven, one of John's favorites, represents completion, and so these seven churches can poetically stand for all churches in the region or maybe even all churches in the world.

- “seven golden lampstands” – These represent a neat poetic image for churches, as places for God’s light to shine. John’s good news is that Jesus (called by Jesus’ own favorite nickname for himself, also a reference to Daniel 7) is with the churches, not absent, whether they see him or not.
- I find the vision in this paragraph arresting and utterly beautiful. To do so yourself, you have to embrace Revelation as poetry and symbol. Try to draw a literal picture, and it will be odd or creepy. Let this book’s images work on your right brain creativity and emotion more than your left brain linear logic. In that spirit, the vision of Jesus:
  - “head and hair were white as wool” – like God in Daniel 7, who is called the Ancient of Days – wise and old. Also, with the bronze, indomitable, stable, not going anywhere
  - “sound of many waters” – evocative of the richness and power of God’s voice (Ezekiel 43:2) Jesus’ weapon is also his voice, his words
  - “eyes ... like a flame a fire... face like the sun” – piercing and penetrating in beauty and life and insight
  - “seven stars” – The lampstands of the churches won’t just be lit by torches but by stars, here stars that are angels. As we mentioned yesterday, this may be a poetic, early Christian way of speaking of the Holy Spirit as the presence and light of Jesus.
  - “I am the first and the last” – Just like the Almighty God, Jesus is alive forever.

### **Spiritual Exercise**

What might the Spirit of God be saying to you through today’s passage? Has anything struck your mind or heart? Looking back over the last 24 hours – yours highs and lows, times of joy or sorrow, presence or distraction, anxiety or peace, has the Spirit of God spoken to you through your life or through any other person? Pay attention for a moment, listen, and ask God how you can respond to whatever comes to mind.

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray for your six, that however much or little they know about Jesus, they would come to understand God to be as beautiful and living and good and alive as today’s vision paints God to be. If you don’t have six non-churchgoing friends in mind to pray for yet, during this season, take a moment to choose six people you’ll pray for in this season.

## Wednesday, February 21

### Revelation 2:1-11

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

<sup>2</sup>“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. <sup>3</sup>I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. <sup>6</sup>Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to

the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

<sup>8</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

<sup>9</sup>“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup>Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. <sup>11</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

### Points of Interest

- “To the angel...” Given that an angel signifies a messenger, this could refer to a leader in the church or poetically to a guardian angel or to the Spirit of God who will help each person receive the message.
- “Ephesus” – A very large city, one of the biggest in the Roman Empire, famous for its wealth, trade, and ornate temple of Diana that was as large as two football fields.
- “These are the words...” Each of the seven addresses follows a formula that includes Jesus speaking to the church. Jesus knows each community intimately and is revealing their true strengths and weaknesses. Each time, an aspect of the opening vision of Jesus (Ch 1) is emphasized.
- “your toil and patient endurance” – This church is cautious, steady, and cares about truth and correct beliefs.
- “...abandoned the love” – Yet this church also lacks love – perhaps lacking deep love for God, perhaps lacking deep love for others, perhaps both.
- “remove your lampstand” – The risk is that without love, this church will cease to exist. Love of God and others is the central command of Jesus and the core to a faith community’s vitality.

- “the tree of life” – Adam and Eve and all their descendants were banished from this source of abundant, eternal life. Apparently, the tree is still waiting, and people who listen to and respond to the Spirit of Jesus can enjoy it.
- “Smyrna” – As Rome conquered other cities, they’d often build temples to the goddess of Roma or to Roman emperors and vie to show their loyalty and patriotism, knowing that in return they would gain favor and wealth from the capital. Smyrna was well-known for its Roman allegiance and accompanying rewards.
- “your affliction and your poverty” – Yet the early house churches are poor, made up of members of the lower classes who aren’t benefitting from the city’s wealth.
- “synagogue of Satan” – This has often been read with anti-Semitic overtones. Today, we can repudiate this anti-Semitism and recognize the challenge of people who are marginalized, misunderstood, and slandered for their faith.
- “the crown of life” – This isn’t a royal crown but an Olympic wreath of joy and victory.
- “Whoever conquers” – a military term. A life of faith can lead to hard work & struggle.
- “the second death” - Just as there can be life after death, there can apparently also be a death after death in the age to come. Part of the crown of joy and victory in following Jesus is no fear for anything that death might bring.

### **Spiritual Exercise**

What might the Spirit of God be saying to you through today’s passage? Has anything struck your mind or heart? Looking back over the last 24 hours – yours highs and lows, times of joy or sorrow, presence or distraction, anxiety or peace, has the Spirit of God spoken to you through your life or through any other person? Pay attention for a moment, listen, and ask God how you can respond to whatever comes to mind.

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Are you or any of your six discouraged? If so, pray that the Jesus who has conquered death will bring encouragement. Are you or any of your six lacking in deep love for God and others? If so, pray that Jesus who has God’s Spirit to give will fill you/them up with God’s love.

## Thursday, February 22

### Revelation 2:12-29

<sup>12</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:<sup>13</sup>“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. <sup>14</sup>But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. <sup>15</sup>So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup>Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

<sup>18</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

<sup>19</sup>“I know your works – your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. <sup>20</sup>But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. <sup>21</sup>I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. <sup>22</sup>Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; <sup>23</sup>and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. <sup>24</sup>But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan,’ to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; <sup>25</sup>only hold fast to what you have until I come. <sup>26</sup>To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; <sup>27</sup>to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered – <sup>28</sup>even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. <sup>29</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

### Points of Interest

- “Pergamum... where Satan’s throne is” – Also a large city, Pergamum was also known for its Roman influence and emperor worship and had a huge and famous altar to Zeus, perhaps what John indelicately labels Satan’s throne.
- “Antipas my witness” – This is the one city that has already seen a follower of Jesus die for his faith, perhaps accused as an early “atheist” because he didn’t participate in Rome’s omnipresent civic religious activities.
- “Balaam” and “the Nicolaitans”- Whoever these people are, they are bad, bad influences. The second group is obscure but the first name is not – it refers to an old story in the book of Numbers of a non-Jewish spiritual leader who opposes Israel and leads them into trouble. These names appear to be codes or symbols for people in Pergamum who advise conformity with the civic religion of Rome, which would include idolatry and immorality as

a cost of participation. Perhaps we could examine what function as the civic religions of our time, such as America-first nationalism or materialism and educational and career excellence. Where do our civic religions lead us away from the voice and teaching of Jesus?

- “make war against them with the sword of my mouth” – Jesus’ remedy isn’t physical violence; after all, the sword is that sword that comes out of his mouth, a metaphor for the piercing and powerful words of Jesus. Jesus’ voice is a piercing antidote to our allegiances and loyalties to other things.
- “hidden manna” – Legend had it some of the miracle food from heaven, described centuries earlier in Exodus, had been stored up for God’s people at the end of the age. Taken as symbol, the invitation is for God to provide what is more satisfying and nutritious than what your empire of choice has on tap.
- “a white stone” – Another apocalyptic hope is that in God, we will fully know who we are and discover that is fully good. As someone who’s paying a therapist as part of my own self-acceptance journey, I get this. Neither Roman armies nor American materialism can give me satisfaction, nourishment, self-acceptance, peace, and love. The Spirit says that Jesus can.
- “Thyatira” – This inland city had less Roman connection but was known for its trade guilds that governed economic life. As with Roman civic religion, these trade guilds practiced feasts that included some connection to worship of other gods. Participation was one of the costs of economic flourishing.
- “Jezebel” – Here the personification of selling out to empire or other gods is the infamous queen from the narrative of I and II Kings. This is one of several times that scripture uses sexual infidelity and prostitution as a metaphor for unfaithfulness to God. This language strikes many of us today as misogynist and violent. It helps me to notice and push back on that. The underlying message, I think, holds – parts of our soul are bound up with the cultural religion we’re assimilated into. Some of my tax money pays for bombs drones drop in Afghanistan. Some of my brain is colonized by the empty promises of America’s mass marketing industry. Some of my sexuality is flavored by all the sex-soaked media I’ve seen. Some of my hopes and heart are owned by my country’s sense of entitlement. And Jesus says this costs me.
- “give authority over the nations... the morning star” – Jesus invites God’s children to hold fast to God in the middle of all this, whatever it costs. We’ll lose prospects for wealth but will gain an immortal authority, signified by two things: joining God in God’s rule and receiving the morning star, which can represent eternal life or the dawning presence of Jesus with us. Is this a present-tense “in our hearts” kind of promise? A future tense “new heavens and new earth” thing? I dunno.

## **Spiritual Exercise**

What might the Spirit of God be saying to you through today's passage? Has anything struck your mind or heart? Looking back over the last 24 hours – yours highs and lows, times of joy or sorrow, presence or distraction, anxiety or peace – has the Spirit of God spoken to you through your life or through any other person? Pay attention for a moment, listen, and ask God how you can respond to whatever comes to mind.

## **A Direction for Prayer**

How does some aspect of your everyday life – your job, your commercial activity, your entertainment consumption – impact your attention or soul and pull you away from God? What might a shift, a turn – repentance – look like?

## Friday, February 23

### Revelation 3:1-13

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

“I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup>Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup>Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. <sup>4</sup>Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup>If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

<sup>7</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the holy one, the true one,

who has the key of David,  
who opens and no one will shut,  
who shuts and no one opens:

<sup>8</sup>“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. <sup>9</sup>I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying – I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. <sup>10</sup>Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. <sup>11</sup>I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. <sup>12</sup>If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. <sup>13</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

### Points of Interest

- “Sardis” – Already an ancient city by the time Revelation was written, Sardis was high on a hill, hard to attack. Legend has it, though, that twice it had been invaded and conquered when its night watch fell asleep on the job.
- “you have a name of being alive, but you are dead” – John evokes Sardis’ past to capture the internal vitality of the house churches there. It sounds like Jesus is pretty alarmed at how weak and vulnerable they are.
- “Wake up” – The solution to the Sardis church’s problems is simple – just pay attention. Jesus hasn’t left Sardis alone – after all, he – like those invading armies of old – plans on continuing to show up in their city. But he’d rather they recognize him than have to grab their attention some other way.
- “...not soiled their clothes... dressed in white” – The dirty clothes represent a church that doesn’t look any different from the rest of Roman imperial culture. The special white togas reserved for a wedding or victory party symbolize devotion to Jesus that makes them stand out.

- “book of life” – This book traditionally represents a place in Jesus’ family or kingdom. The severity of threatening to blot out people’s names seems uncharacteristic for Jesus, but maybe this is part of the stark attention-getting strategy here.
- “...who has the key of David” – Jesus has the keys to God’s house, access into the family and presence of God.
- “an open door” – Jesus has given an opportunity for their lives to reveal the presence of Jesus to many in their city. With Jesus, our size and status have no connection to our possibility.
- “synagogue of Satan”- Some of the churches have resistance from Roman opposition. This is the second community that is experiencing hardship from their Jewish neighbors. John’s harsh language captures the enmity and accusation they experienced, but is over-the-top and has been used to justify later anti-Semitism. It might be helpful to remember that John himself and most of Jesus’ first followers were Jewish, so this language represents an intra-Jewish conflict, not an anti-Jewish attack.
- “if you conquer” – Victory for these churches isn’t defeating anybody else. It is maintaining encouragement and avoiding assimilation to their larger world’s temptations.
- “a pillar in the temple” – Wealthy donors in our times get plaques on walls of institutions. Roman citizens who served the state well could get their name inscribed on a pillar in a temple. Jesus promises his faithful children that they themselves will become pillars of what God is doing in their midst, with God’s name inscribed onto them.

### **Spiritual Exercise**

What might the Spirit of God be saying to you through today’s passage? Has anything struck your mind or heart? Looking back over the last 24 hours – yours highs and lows, times of joy or sorrow, presence or distraction, anxiety or peace, has the Spirit of God spoken to you through your life or through any other person? Pay attention for a moment, listen, and ask God how you can respond to whatever comes to mind.

### **A Direction for Prayer**

Pray for your six, that if any monotony or discouragement has lulled them to sleep, that Jesus would get their attention with something new and good in life.