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LIGUORI CATHOLIC BIBLE STUDY



The Book of Revelation

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF PERSECUTION

WILLIAM A. ANDERSON, DMIN, PHD



Liguori

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Introduction to *Liguori Catholic Bible Study*

READING THE BIBLE can be daunting. It's a complex book, and many a person of goodwill has tried to read the Bible and ended up putting it down in utter confusion. It helps to have a companion, and *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is a solid one. Over the course of this series, you'll learn about biblical messages, themes, personalities, and events and understand how the books of the Bible rose out of the need to address new situations.

Across the centuries, people of faith have asked, "Where is God in this moment?" Millions of Catholics look to the Bible for encouragement in their journey of faith. Wisdom teaches us not to undertake Bible study alone, disconnected from the Church that was given Scripture to share and treasure. When used as a source of prayer and thoughtful reflection, the Bible comes alive.

Your choice of a Bible-study program should be dictated by what you want to get out of it. One goal of *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* is to give readers greater familiarity with the Bible's structure, themes, personalities, and message. But that's not enough. This program will also teach you to use Scripture in your prayer. God's message is as compelling and urgent today as ever, but we get only part of the message when it's memorized and stuck in our head. It's meant for the entire person—physical, emotional, and spiritual.

We're baptized into life with Christ, and we're called to live more fully with Christ today as we practice the values of justice, peace, forgiveness, and community. God's new covenant was written on the hearts of the people of Israel; we, their spiritual descendants, are loved that intimately by God today. *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* will draw you closer to God, in whose image and likeness we are fashioned.

Group and Individual Study

The *Liguori Catholic Bible Study* series is intended for group and individual study and prayer. This series gives you the tools to start a study group. Gathering two or three people in a home or announcing the meeting of a Bible-study group in a parish or community can bring surprising results. Each lesson in this series contains a section to help groups study, reflect, pray, and share biblical reflections. Each lesson but the first also has a second section for individual study.

Many people who want to learn more about the Bible don't know where to begin. This series gives them a place to start and helps them continue until they're familiar with all the books of the Bible.

Bible study can be a lifelong project, always enriching those who wish to be faithful to God's Word. When people complete a study of the whole Bible, they can begin again, making new discoveries with each new adventure into the Word of God.



Lectio Divina (Sacred Reading)

BIBLE STUDY isn't just a matter of gaining intellectual knowledge of the Bible; it's also about gaining a greater understanding of God's love and concern for creation. The purpose of reading and knowing the Bible is to enrich our relationship with God. God loves us and gave us the Bible to illustrate that love. In his April 12, 2013, address before the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Pope Francis stressed that "the Church's life and mission are founded on the Word of God which is the soul of theology and at the same time inspires the whole of Christian life."

The Meaning of *Lectio Divina*

Lectio divina is a Latin expression that means "divine or sacred reading." The process for *lectio divina* consists of Scripture readings, reflection, and prayer. Many clergy, religious, and laity use *lectio divina* in their daily spiritual reading to develop a closer and more loving relationship with God. Learning about Scripture has as its purpose the living of its message, which demands a period of reflection on Scripture passages.

Prayer and *Lectio Divina*

Prayer is a necessary element for the practice of *lectio divina*. The entire process of reading and reflecting is a prayer. It's not merely an intellectual pursuit; it's also a spiritual one. Page 15 includes an Opening Prayer for gathering one's thoughts before moving on to the passages in each section.

This prayer may be used privately or in a group. For those who use the book for daily spiritual reading, the prayer for each section may be repeated each day. Some may wish to keep a journal of each day's meditation.

Pondering the Word of God

Lectio divina is the ancient Christian spiritual practice of reading the holy Scriptures with intentionality and devotion. This practice helps Christians center themselves and descend to the level of the heart to enter an inner quiet space, finding God.

This sacred reading is distinct from reading for knowledge or information, and it's more than the pious practice of spiritual reading. It is the practice of opening ourselves to the action and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As we intentionally focus on and become present to the inner meaning of the Scripture passage, the Holy Spirit enlightens our mind and heart. We come to the text willing to be influenced by a deeper meaning that lies within the words and thoughts we ponder.

In this space, we open ourselves to be challenged and changed by the inner meaning we experience. We approach the text in a spirit of faith and obedience as a disciple ready to be taught by the Holy Spirit. As we savor the sacred text, we let go of our usual control of how we expect God to act in our life and surrender our heart and conscience to the flow of the divine (*divina*) through the reading (*lectio*).

The fundamental principle of *lectio divina* leads us to understand the profound mystery of the Incarnation, "The Word became flesh," not only in history but also within us.

Praying *Lectio* Today

Before you begin, relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). Then practice these four simple actions:

1. Read a passage from Scripture or the daily Mass readings. This is known as *lectio*. (If the Word of God is read aloud, the hearers listen attentively.)

2. Pray the selected passage with attention as you listen for a specific meaning that comes to mind. Once again, the reading is listened to or silently read and reflected or meditated on. This is known as *meditatio*.
3. The exercise becomes active. Pick a word, sentence, or idea that surfaces from your consideration of the chosen text. Does the reading remind you of a person, place, or experience? If so, pray about it. Compose your thoughts and reflection into a simple word or phrase. This prayer-thought will help you remove distractions during the *lectio*. This exercise is called *oratio*.
4. In silence, with your eyes closed, quiet yourself and become conscious of your breathing. Let your thoughts, feelings, and concerns fade as you consider the selected passage in the previous step (*oratio*). If you're distracted, use your prayer word to help you return to silence. This is *contemplatio*.

This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

Many teachers of prayer call contemplation the prayer of resting in God, a prelude to losing oneself in the presence of God. Scripture is transformed in our hearing as we pray and allow our hearts to unite intimately with the Lord. The Word truly takes on flesh, and this time it is manifested in our flesh.



How to Use This Bible-Study Companion

THE BIBLE, along with the commentaries and reflections found in this study, will help participants become familiar with the Scripture texts and lead them to reflect more deeply on the texts' messages. At the end of this study, participants will have a firm grasp of the Book of Revelation, becoming therefore more aware of the spiritual nourishment it offers. This study is not only an intellectual adventure, it's also a spiritual one. The reflections lead participants into their own journey with the Scripture readings.

Context

When John wrote the Book of Revelation, his intent was to encourage persecuted Christians to remain faithful to Christ. Although evil existed in the Roman world and appeared to be unconquerable, John reminds his readers that God is in control; evil has power in the world only for a specified period of time determined by God. To help readers learn about each passage in relation to those around it, each lesson begins with an overview that puts the Scripture passages into context.

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Part 1: Group Study

To give participants a comprehensive study of Revelation, this book is divided into six lessons. Lesson 1 is group study only; Lessons 2 through 6 are divided into Part 1, group study, and Part 2, individual study. For example, Lesson 2 covers Revelation 2—5. The study group reads and discusses only chapter 2 (Part 1). Participants privately read and reflect on chapters 3 through 5 (Part 2).

Group study may or may not include *lectio divina*. With *lectio divina*, the group meets for ninety minutes using the first format on page 13. Without *lectio divina*, the group meets for one hour using the format at the bottom of page 13, and participants are urged to privately read the *lectio divina* section at the end of Part 1. It contains additional reflections on the Scripture passages studied during the group session that will take participants even further into the passages.

Part 2: Individual Study

The passages not covered in Part 1 are divided into shorter components, one to be studied each day. Participants who don't belong to a study group can use the lessons for private sacred reading. They may choose to reflect on one Scripture passage per day, making it possible for a clearer understanding of the Scripture passages used in their *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

A PROCESS FOR SACRED READING

Liguori Publications has designed this study to be user-friendly and manageable. However, group dynamics and leaders vary. We're not trying to keep the Holy Spirit from working in your midst, thus we suggest you decide beforehand which format works best for your group. If you have limited time, you could study the Bible as a group and save prayer and reflection for personal time.

However, if your group wishes to digest and feast on sacred Scripture through both prayer and study, we recommend you spend closer to ninety minutes each week by gathering to study and pray with Scripture. *Lectio divina*

(see page 8) is an ancient contemplative prayer form that moves readers from the head to the heart in meeting the Lord. We strongly suggest using this prayer form whether in individual or group study.

GROUP-STUDY FORMATS

1. Bible Study With *Lectio Divina*

About ninety minutes of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Read each Scripture passage aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (30 minutes)
- ✠ Read each Scripture passage aloud a second time, followed by quiet time for meditation and contemplation (5 minutes)
- ✠ Spend some time in prayer with the selected passage. Group participants will slowly read the Scripture passage a third time in silence, listening for the voice of God as they read (10–20 minutes)
- ✠ Shared reflection (10–15 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

To become acquainted with lectio divina, see page 8.

2. Bible Study

About one hour of group study

- ✠ Gathering and opening prayer (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Read each Scripture passage aloud (5 minutes)
- ✠ Silently review the commentary and prepare to discuss it with the group (3–5 minutes)
- ✠ Discuss the Scripture passage along with the commentary and reflection (40 minutes)
- ✠ Closing prayer (3–5 minutes)

Notes to the Leader

- ✘ Bring a copy of *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Plan which sections will be covered each week of your Bible study.
- ✘ Read the material in advance of each session.
- ✘ Establish written ground rules. (Example: We won't keep you longer than ninety minutes; don't dominate the sharing by arguing or debating.)
- ✘ Meet in an appropriate and welcoming gathering space (church building, meeting room, house).
- ✘ Provide name tags and perhaps use a brief icebreaker for the first meeting; ask participants to introduce themselves.
- ✘ Mark the Scripture passage(s) that will be read during the session.
- ✘ Decide how you would like the Scripture to be read aloud (whether by one or multiple readers).
- ✘ Use a clock or watch.
- ✘ Provide extra Bibles (or copies of the Scripture passages) for participants who don't bring their Bible.
- ✘ Ask participants to read the introduction (page 17) before the first session.
- ✘ Tell participants which passages to study and urge them to read the passages and commentaries before the meeting.
- ✘ If you opt to use the *lectio divina* format, familiarize yourself with this prayer form ahead of time.

Notes to the Participants

- ✘ Bring a copy of the *New American Bible*, revised edition.
- ✘ Read the introduction (page 17) before the first session.
- ✘ Read the Scripture passages and commentaries before each session.
- ✘ Be prepared to share and listen respectfully. (This is not a time to debate beliefs or argue.)

Opening Prayer

Leader: O God, come to my assistance.

Response: O Lord, make haste to help me.

Leader: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit...

Response: ...as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Leader: Christ is the vine and we are the branches. As branches linked to Jesus, the vine, we are called to recognize that the Scriptures are always being fulfilled in our lives. It is the living Word of God living on in us. Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your divine wisdom, knowledge, and love.

Response: Open our mind and heart as we study your great love for us as shown in the Bible.

Reader: (Open your Bible to the assigned Scripture(s) and read in a paced, deliberate manner. Pause for one minute, listening for a word, phrase, or image that you may use in your *lectio divina* practice.)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us.

Response: Our Father...

Leader: Lord, inspire us with your Spirit as we study your Word in the Bible. Be with us this day and every day as we strive to know you and serve you and to love as you love. We believe that through your goodness and love, the Spirit of the Lord is truly upon us. Allow the words of the Bible, your Word, to capture us and inspire us to live as you live and to love as you love.

Response: Amen.

Leader: May the divine assistance remain with us always.

Response: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



INTRODUCTION

The Book of Revelation

Read this overview before the first session.

During the Korean War, a radio operator behind enemy lines received a coded message ordering him to meet a small boat at a nearby beach. The message warned that the enemy was nearing his vicinity and he had less than three hours to destroy his radio and escape. Although the message was sent in code, the radio operator feared the enemy would intercept the message, decipher the code, and know exactly where he was to meet his boat. His hope was that it would take the enemy several hours to decipher the code, thus giving him time to get away. Fortunately, the enemy was apparently still attempting to decipher the code when he met his boat and escaped.

Throughout history, people often used coded messages to hide what they were saying from others. When parents wish to keep what they are saying from their young children, they often code their message by spelling out their words. Children use codes in games, believing adults are not able to understand their secret messages. Students in school use a type of code when they give teachers nicknames, or when they speak with newly coined words that are meaningless to adults. Coded messages enable communication to take place in the unsuspecting presence of the one being spoken about.

Common words and images known to everyone could have a double meaning or an opposite meaning for the writer and recipient. For example, a teenager could text a friend and say a test was “tough,” meaning the test was “easy.” If someone intercepted the text, he or she may believe the test was very difficult. In this way, the text becomes coded by using a word with a meaning different than the commonly accepted meaning of the word.

In times of persecution or war, coded messages were sometimes used to give directions, encouragement, warnings, or information to the recipient. It would be a mistake to interpret these messages as though they were presenting an exact account of an event. This commentary is an attempt to break John's code and make it understandable to the reader.

A CODED MESSAGE FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

The history of Palestine in the centuries before Christ was a history of turmoil for the Jewish people. From the time of the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, the people of Palestine endured a number of challenges to their faith by rulers seeking to force the Greek culture on the Jewish people. In 167 BC, the Jews rebelled and after twenty-five years of bitter fighting and great losses, they gained their independence in 142 BC.

Although the Jewish people became independent as a result of the revolt, internal strife eventually weakened the nation and caused it to forfeit its freedom. Around 67 BC, a bitter dispute between two claimants to leadership in Judea led to the weaker of the two calling upon Rome for help. In 63 BC, Pompey, a general in the Roman army, marched into Judea and easily captured the land for the Roman Empire. The Romans chose their own Jewish high priest, which, in effect, made the position of high priest equivalent to a provincial governor and a puppet of Roman rule.

The Romans controlled their vast empire not only by their military might but also by forcing people to share a common belief in the Roman gods and in worship of the emperor. People who shared common beliefs in the same gods would be less likely to revolt, especially if one of the gods was the emperor. Since worshipping Roman gods did not mean a nation had to denounce its own gods but simply add other Roman gods to their list, Roman leadership believed the obligation of worshipping Roman gods would pose very few problems.

The Romans soon discovered, however, that the Jewish people worshiped only one God. The refusal of the Jews to add the Roman gods to their faith in the one true God of Israel led to a long and sometimes bloody struggle. Rome finally permitted the Jews to worship their one God, a situation that

existed during the time Jesus lived in Palestine. The Jewish nation alone received such a privilege.

For a period of time, Rome viewed the early followers of Jesus as Jews and allowed them to worship their one God. In time, however, when the followers of Jesus were rejected by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, Rome came to realize that major differences of belief existed between the strict Jews and the followers of Jesus. With this discovery, Rome no longer considered them Jews and attempted to force them to believe in false gods. The refusal of Christians to accept other gods led to bloody persecutions of the early Christians. By the end of the first century, Christians in Rome had become victims of several horrifying persecutions, and they needed encouragement to help them remain faithful.

The author of Revelation, who identified himself as John, offered these Christians the hope and encouragement they needed by writing a book coded with signs and symbols familiar to his audience yet unfamiliar to the Romans. In writing his book, John used apocalyptic images, symbols, and language. His words often included veiled references to many Old Testament authors such as Ezekiel, Daniel, Isaiah, and Zechariah, references familiar to his audience, but unfamiliar to those who were not Christian.

John wrote Revelation toward the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81-96), a ruthless emperor who initiated a horrible persecution of Christians. A fourth-century historian wrote that Domitian, who tolerated Christianity during the first part of his reign, unleashed his persecution of Christians toward the end of his reign. John wanted to offer hope and encouragement to these suffering Christians. His message taught that evil, although it seemed so powerful, occurs only as long as God allows it. The period of evil's power will come to an end when God decides to end it.

CHARACTERISTICS OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

- ✠ During the Old Testament period and the period of the early Christian community, believers endured persecution for their faith. In the midst of such situations, apocalyptic writings came into vogue. They blossomed predominantly in Jewish and Christian literature from 200 BC to AD 200.
- ✠ The word *apocalypse* comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which means to reveal or uncover. Religious apocalyptic writing consists of an uncovering, or a revelation, given by God to offer the faithful hope for the future.
- ✠ A chosen agent of God claims to receive this secret revelation through visions. Such knowledge can only be gained through “revelation,” since it predicts events beyond our human knowledge.
- ✠ Apocalyptic literature teaches that the apparently unbeatable power of evil would eventually be overcome by God. The basic theme of apocalyptic literature is “God is in control.”
- ✠ When people today hear of apocalypse, their thoughts often tend toward cosmic upheavals and the horrible events that will take place at the end of time. Apocalyptic writings often speak of wars and earthquakes, heavenly bodies (sun, moon, and stars) falling from the skies, and a majestic visitation from God. These signs or symbols must be interpreted in their proper literary form and not taken literally. They symbolize a world in spiritual, not physical, turmoil.
- ✠ Apocalyptic writings have their roots in ancient myths, beliefs about world structures, poetry, prophecy, history, and other forms of literature.
- ✠ Apocalyptic writings reveal that the power of evil will soon come to an end when God, who is in control, ends it. No one is more powerful than God. God will destroy the power of evil and will save those who remain faithful. The just will share in a new and glorious life.
- ✠ The authors of apocalyptic writings intended their writings to address current, not future, events, although they offer hope for the future. Remaining faithful to God in the present difficult calamities will provide the faithful with a glorious end.
- ✠ Although apocalyptic writings speak about the end times, they offer a hopeful image of a new heavenly Jerusalem that a multitude of people will enjoy. The end times are referred to by the Greek word *eschaton*.

- ✠ Although some early prophets, such as Ezekiel and Zechariah, included apocalyptic images in their writings, they actually belong to the prophetic tradition, presenting messages and warnings from God concerning the punishment of the Israelites. Some commentators include Daniel among apocalyptic rather than prophetic writers.
- ✠ Apocalyptic writers wrote in times of persecution and turmoil. Ezekiel prophesied while in exile in Babylon, shortly before the final Babylonian devastation of Jerusalem in 587 BC. Using bizarre visions in his apocalyptic passages, he taught God was in control and would bring the Israelites to their homeland, no matter how hopeless and desperate their present situation seemed.
- ✠ The author of the Book of Daniel also wrote during a time of persecution. Although he writes about a man named Daniel who supposedly was living during the Babylonian period, the author himself was actually writing centuries later during a period when the Israelites in Palestine were suffering under the brutal domination of King Antiochus IV of Syria, who ruled from 167 to 164 BC. The second half of the Book of Daniel, beginning with chapter 7, presents apocalyptic images of visions and heavenly protectors for the people of Israel. An example of Daniel's apocalyptic writings is found in Daniel 7 where he describes a vision of four immense beasts whose appearance symbolically foretold the rise and fall of powerful kingdoms.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

- ✠ In Revelation, the author (John) makes use of coded words and images. Interpreting the text as though it were history or an accurate account of events would miss the entire message of the book.
- ✠ Since Revelation belongs entirely to the apocalyptic tradition, many writers refer to it as "the Apocalypse."
- ✠ Revelation speaks about the *eschaton* (the end of time), using ancient symbols and images found in other apocalyptic and prophetic writings, most notably the apocalyptic writings of Ezekiel and Daniel. The book offers hope for the future during a time of persecution.
- ✠ Revelation uses myth, symbol, the words of the prophets, and history to spread its message throughout the Roman Empire without the Roman

officials being aware of its content. In the book, the coded word for the Roman Empire is “Babylon,” the ancient empire that overran Judah six centuries before Christ and led many of its inhabitants into exile.

- ✠ Like any apocalyptic work, Revelation had no intention of predicting future events that would signal the end of the world for later generations. To use Revelation as a book that foretells signs signaling the end of the world is to miss its message.
- ✠ Revelation was a book of hope offered to people in a time of persecution, most notably the time during which the author was writing. In one sense, the book has a timeless message for all people insofar as the book reminds the reader God is always in control, even in times of persecution when evil seems too powerful to overcome.
- ✠ Unfortunately, every century can count the many misuses of Revelation by those who interpreted the book literally and used its signs and symbols as evidence the world was soon to meet a catastrophic end. It is not a book of doom.
- ✠ Its title is the Book of Revelation, not “Revelations.” From beginning to end, it is a revelation about God’s power in the midst of evil.
- ✠ Although John wrote as though he were receiving his message about the letters to the churches and his visions in Revelation from Christ and angels, the reader should keep in mind his message is actually an apocalyptic form of literature that John did not actually experience but which came from his use of scriptural apocalyptic images. A large portion of his message comes as a result of the apocalyptic writings found in Ezekiel and Daniel. He also makes use of prophetic sources such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.
- ✠ John wrote Revelation near the end of the first century, after other books and letters of the New Testament were written. Many of the references to previous Scripture writers will be found in this commentary.
- ✠ The genius of apocalyptic writing is its ability to present its message as though the one receiving it is actually experiencing the events described. Christians believe Revelation teaches an inspired message and is not a historical presentation of the events depicted.



LESSON 2

The Seven Churches of Asia

REVELATION 2—5

Worthy are you to receive the scroll and break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they will reign on earth (5:9–10).

Opening Prayer (SEE PAGE 15)

Context

Part 1: Revelation 2 In this passage, John applies to each of the seven churches an image of Christ linked with the message contained in each letter. To the thriving city of Ephesus, John applies the image of Christ as the one who holds the seven stars in his hand and walks in the midst of the seven lampstands. To the troubled city of Smyrna, he applies the image of the first and last, the one who died and came to life. To the sinful city of Pergamum, he applies the image of the sharp, two-edged sword. To the faithful but weak city of Thyatira, he applies the image of the Son of God, who possesses eyes like a fiery flame and feet like polished brass. In the letter to each of the churches, Christ praises them for their faithfulness and warns them about the weaknesses he finds in their midst.

Part 2: Revelation 3—5 To the spiritually dead church of Sardis, John applies the image of the one who has the seven spirits and seven stars. Sardis appears to be alive, but is dead. To the faithful church of Philadelphia, he applies the image of one who holds the keys to death and the netherworld. To the lukewarm church of Laodicea, he applies the image of the faithful witness. He wants them to accept him as he stands at the door and knocks.

John experiences a vision which lifts him up to heaven where he sees one resembling precious stones sitting on a throne. He also sees twenty-four elders dressed in white and wearing golden crowns and four living creatures around the throne praising God. The elders join in praising the Lord.

John sees a scroll with seven seals and writing on both sides. When no one is worthy enough to open the scroll, John begins to weep, but he receives word the lion of Judah, the Lamb that was slain, was worthy to receive and open the scroll. By his blood, the Lamb purchased for God people of every nation. All the heavenly hosts praised the Lord.

PART 1: GROUP STUDY (REVELATION 2)

Read aloud Revelation 2.

2:1–7 Letter to Ephesus

Christ instructed John to write the first of his seven letters to the angel of the church at Ephesus. Although he was told to write to the guardian angel of each church, he was actually writing to the church community. Ephesus was not the capital of the province, but due to its strategic position on the road to the Aegean Sea, it was the largest and most important city for trade in the province. If emperor worship were to survive anywhere in the empire, it would be at Ephesus where idol worship was a dominant practice. The city boasted one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, which was the temple of the goddess Artemis.

The importance of the city, as well as its loyalty to Rome, most likely prompted John to address his first letter to the church at this city. Paul the

Apostle preached at Ephesus and spent more time there than at any other place during his missionary journeys. At the end of Paul's three years in the city, a man named Demetrius, a silversmith who crafted small images of the goddess Artemis, realized Paul's preaching against idol worship was ruining his business. He caused a riot that almost cost Paul his life (see Acts 19:23–40).

John begins his letter to Ephesus as coming from Christ, the one who walks among the lampstands holding the seven stars in his right hand. Walking among the lampstands with the stars in his right hand signifies the authority and presence of Christ in the midst of the churches of Asia Minor. Christ praises the community of the church at Ephesus for their good deeds and their faithfulness. They exposed self-proclaimed apostles as imposters and never grew weary of suffering for the name of Christ.

Christ finds fault with some of them for turning away from their first love, that is, their early fervor in the faith. Although he does not specify exactly what they did to abandon their faith, he exhorts them to return to the practice of their former good works. Christ threatens to remove their lampstand (the angel) from its place unless they repent.

After his warning, Christ compliments the church at Ephesus for its stand against a heretical group known as the Nicolaitans. In this first letter, we learn nothing about the teachings of this false group, but a reference to their doctrines will be mentioned again in the third letter.

The first letter concludes, as all of them do, with a call to the community to heed what the Spirit is saying. Christ promises that those who remain faithful will eat from the tree of life that grows in the Garden of God. This is a reference to the Garden of Eden and the events that took place there (see Genesis 2:4–14).

2:8–11 To Smyrna

Christ instructed John to write to the angel of the church at Smyrna, another important commercial city located just north of Ephesus. In the letter to the church at Ephesus, John uses the image of Christ as one who holds the seven stars in his hand and walks among the seven lampstands, thereby showing Christ's authority over the destiny of the churches. In this second letter, the image chosen represents Christ as the first and the last,

the one who was dead and came to life (1:17–18). In the letter to Smyrna, John speaks of conflict and the apparent power of evil. Christ, as the first and the last, will nevertheless conquer and bring the faithful to a new life.

In each of these visions, Christ expresses knowledge of the situation of the churches he is addressing. In this case, he informs the community of Smyrna he is familiar with their hardships and poverty in the midst of riches. Because of Smyrna's location near the Aegean Sea, merchants in the area became very wealthy through trade, while the majority of people lived in poverty. The poverty referred to in this letter may refer to the spiritual poverty of the area or to the refusal of owners to hire Christians, a practice in some cities of the Roman Empire during John's era.

Christ informs them he is aware of the afflictions they suffer at the hands of those who claim to be Jews but who in reality are not true Jews. He identifies these Jews as belonging to the assembly of Satan. Since there were many Jews living in Smyrna, John may be referring to Jews who have faith in Christ but who lived according to Jewish customs to avoid persecution. The faithful Jews were not the ones causing hardships for the Christians. When Paul preached in the synagogues, many Jews listened to his preaching without reacting, while others ejected Paul from the synagogues.

Christ declares those who remain faithful to Christ have no need for fear. Although the devil might cast them into prison, they will eventually receive the crown of life. This image of the crown of life is apparently taken from the image of the victory crown presented at Greek athletic events. Paul the Apostle uses the image of a crown when he writes about runners, saying, "They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one" (1 Corinthians 9:25). The meaning of the crown in Revelation is clear. The crown of life (eternal reward) is promised to those who persevere. Christ tells them they will face this affliction for ten days, a symbolic number meaning the days of the devil's power are limited. The reference to ten days should not be taken as exactly ten days. A day is simply a duration of time in apocalyptic writings that could be a short or long period.

John ends the message he received from Christ, as he does the others, by calling on his listeners to put his words into action. The faithful will not face a "second death" of eternal punishment after their physical death.

2:12–17 To Pergamum

John sends Christ's third letter to the angel of the church at Pergamum, the city in which Rome established its seat of government in Asia. Christ identifies the city as the place where "Satan's throne" is erected, a reference to its political position within the empire. The letter recalls the symbol of the two-edged sword used for Christ in the first chapter (1:16) and its meaning as one of judgment. The Christians of this town remained faithful, even when one of their number, Antipas, was killed for not rejecting the faith.

After these words of praise, Pergamum, like the other cities, receives a warning. In the Book of Numbers, we read that Balak, the king of the Moabites, sends for Balaam to have him curse the Israelite nation. Although the Lord does not permit Balaam to curse the Israelites, the Israelites eventually commit sin by engaging in illicit relations with the Moabite women and by eating the food sacrificed to idols (see Numbers 23—25:5). Christ tells the people of Pergamum they are like the Israelites of old who follow the teaching of Balaam who instructed Balak concerning the destruction of the Israelites. Christ names the followers of the teaching of the Nicolaitans as an example of these evil deeds. The Nicolaitans apparently taught that Christians could honor the emperor as a god, since such a god did not actually exist, and they could eat the food offered to nonexistent and false idols.

The Lord warns his listeners that if they do not repent, he will come and make war against them with the sword of his mouth, that is, he will pass a harsh judgment on them. The Israelites of old were executed for their sins, and the implication is that Christians will share in a similar spiritual execution by being cut off from God.

Christ calls the church at Pergamum to hear his words and put them into action. Instead of eating food offered to idols, they will only share in eternal victory by taking part in the hidden manna (the Eucharist). In the days when John was writing his book, some people had the superstitious practice of having magical names known only to themselves and used to ward off evil spirits. Christ, in opposition to this superstition, tells those who heed his word they will have a new, hidden name inscribed on a white stone. This new name will be received at the time of their eternal victory.

2:18–29 To Thyatira

John sends his fourth letter from Christ, described by John as the Son of God, to the angel of the church in Thyatira. Christ is one whose eyes blaze like fire and whose feet are like polished brass. This image, as the earlier images of Christ, is taken from the first chapter (1:14–15), and it symbolizes Christ as the one who sees into the depths of all people and judges them. As in the previous letters, Christ declares his knowledge about the Christians of Thyatira, praising them for their virtues of love, faith, service, and endurance. Endurance here refers to their courage in standing firm and not allowing themselves to be lured into idol worship. In recent times, they were apparently being harassed even more for their faith, making their steadfastness in the faith greater than their earlier acts of faith.

A warning again follows the words of praise. Christ refers to Jezebel, a false Old Testament prophetess who was the wife of King Ahab of Israel and who worshiped the idol Baal (see 1 Kings 16:31). Christ tells the people of Thyatira they are tolerating “a Jezebel” who is leading them to play the harlot and to eating food sacrificed to idols. The worship of false gods was often referred to as prostitution in Old Testament writings (see Hosea 4:12). The sins are the same as those identified with the Nicolaitans. Christ has given this idolatrous woman an opportunity to repent, but she refused. As a result, she must suffer on a sickbed for her sinfulness, and those who sin with her will likewise suffer with her unless they repent. Her children, meaning those who follow her ways, will face spiritual death. All the churches who witness this outcome will realize Christ sees far into the minds and hearts of all and judges all as they deserve.

Different groups existed within the Thyatira community. There were those who chose to follow the ways of idol worship, and those who knew nothing of these “deep secrets” of Satan. Christ addresses those who remained faithful, declaring they must remain faithful until he comes. They will then partake of Christ’s victory, sharing in the authority he received from the Father. His reign shall be as strong as a rod of iron. Sinners will shatter like clay pots before him. The faithful will receive the morning star, a symbol of resurrection. This letter to the church at Thyatira ends with the usual call for all to heed what they have heard and what the Spirit told them.

Review Questions

1. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Ephesus?
2. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Smyrna?
3. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Pergamum?
4. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Thyatira?

Closing Prayer (SEE PAGE 15)

Pray the closing prayer now or after *lectio divina*.

Lectio Divina (SEE PAGE 8)

Relax your body and maintain a posture of prayer (back straight, eyes shut, feet flat on the floor). This exercise can take as long as you want, but in the context of this Bible study, 10 to 20 minutes should be sufficient.

The meditations that follow are provided only to help group participants use this prayer form, but note that *lectio* is intended to bring one to a place of prayerful contemplation where the Word of God speaks to the hearer from his or her heart. (See page 8 for further instruction.)

Letter to Ephesus (2:1–7)

In the letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus, John writes Christ's words, bidding those who have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Faith gives one the ears to hear. Jesus realized this when he speaks of those who reject the message of God. He compares them to children who call out to one another, "We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a dirge, but you did not weep" (Luke 7:32). Jesus came among them eating and drinking and they called him a glutton, and John the Baptist came living an austere life, and they rejected the idea he was sent by God. It was not that Jesus and John were not preaching the truth, but no one was prepared to accept their message. The people did not have the ears to hear the message the Spirit was sharing with them.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

To Smyrna (2:8–11)

Although Christians in Smyrna are living in poverty, they are spiritually rich in placing their trust in God. Christians can view life as a type of race where the winner receives a crown. When runners begin to race, they keep their mind on the goal, not on the people around them. The people in Smyrna who believe in Christ have hope of gaining an imperishable crown by keeping their mind on Christ and their eternal life. They are able to keep to the race, follow Christ's commands, no matter how much they suffer or how weary they become. Knowing the Lord will overcome in the end offers them hope and strength. All Christians are called to run such a race, keeping our eye on Jesus Christ, the goal of our life as a Christian.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

To Pergamum (2:12–17)

In Maccabees 2 (6:18–31), the author tells the story of a man named Eleazar who was prepared to die rather than eat pork, which he believed was against God's law. A friend tried to save him from death by telling him to bring his own food with him and pretend to eat pork. He refused, not because he would offend God, but because he would give bad example to the younger Jews who thought he was eating food sacrificed to the false gods. He was killed, even though he realized he could avoid eating food deemed to be unclean by the Jews. In the same manner, the Christians at Pergamum died, even though they knew the food offered to the gods was actually offered to no one. Although Paul realized food offered to idols that did not exist could be eaten, he tells the people to avoid eating it if it scandalizes others (see 1 Corinthians 8:7–13).

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

To Thyatira (2:18–29)

God warned Moses about the Israelites committing idolatry, saying "...this people will prostitute themselves by following the foreign gods among whom they will live in the land they are about to enter" (Deuteronomy 31:16). Committing oneself to Christ is akin to linking one's life with Christ just as a husband and a wife commit themselves to each other. Any form of worship-

ing idols of the world would fit into this image of prostitution. People who make the goods of the world more important than God would fall into the category of this type of prostitution. We have to ask ourselves if any sin in our life is really a form of idolatry.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

PART 2: INDIVIDUAL STUDY (REVELATION 3—5)

Day 1: John Writes Letters to Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (3)

John sends Christ's fifth letter to the angel of the church in Sardis, a city thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. The city was destroyed by an earthquake in 17 BC and was then rebuilt by the emperor Tiberius. In this letter, Christ is portrayed as the one who holds the seven spirits, that is, the seven stars, in his hand. As the ruler of all the churches, Christ speaks with authority and a warning for all.

Christ informs the church at Sardis that although their faith seems to be alive, it is, in reality, dead. He immediately softens this harsh statement by saying they should awaken and strengthen their faith, which is now on the verge of death. Although their faith is not dead, it will soon die unless they change their way of life. Christ informs them they are not living up to the message they first received with enthusiasm. If they do not change, Christ warns he will come to them like a thief. This image is also found in the Gospel of Matthew (24:43), and it speaks of the suddenness of Christ's coming to call them to judgment.

In the city of Sardis, some have remained faithful by not soiling their clothes. The imagery of clothes, whether white or soiled, alludes to one's inner disposition and not literally to the clothing one is wearing. In the Christian Baptismal Rite, those who are baptized come out of the water and put on a white robe to signify their inner dedication and purity. Christ declares that the ones who are faithful will be the ones clothed victoriously in white. Christ will witness to their faithfulness before the Father and his angels. The names of those who remain faithful will not be erased from the book of life. The

image of the book of life, often mentioned later in Revelation, represents one's citizenship in eternal life. In becoming a Christian, a person becomes a citizen of this life and, only by rejecting faith, will a person's name be erased from this book. This letter to the church at Sardis concludes with Christ's customary call to heed his words.

Christ tells John to write his sixth letter to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, a city southeast of Sardis. Christ is here portrayed as the holy and true one, references recalling the same words of praise given to God in the Old Testament: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:3). Christ has the power of the key of David, a reference to Christ as the true successor of David. Isaiah relays a story of someone receiving the key of the house of David, which gives him the right to open what no one shall shut and to shut what no one shall open (see Isaiah 22:22). The Scriptures often use the image of keys to signify power and authority.

Christ praises the church in Philadelphia. He knows of their good deeds and thus opens a door for them that no one can shut. This door may further signify the opportunity to suffer for Christ or, more likely, the door to eternal life. Despite the small size and political weakness of the church in Philadelphia, the church remained faithful to Christ's word and did not deny Christ in the midst of persecution. Christ said those who lie when they claim to be true Jews belong to the "assembly of Satan." The Lord predicts they will come and prostrate themselves at the feet of the faithful when they realize Christ's great love for them. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet pictures great nations as bowing down before those who have God with them (see Isaiah 45:14).

Because the church at Philadelphia remains firm in their allegiance to Christ's message, they will not undergo the hour of trial coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. Christ promises to come soon, urging the faithful to hold fast to what they have and not lose the crown of eternal life they have received. As victors, they shall be like pillars in the new heavenly temple. On them, Christ will inscribe the name of God and the name of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven. He will inscribe his new and glorified name on them. The letter ends with the usual call to heed these words.

Christ sends his final message to the church at Laodicea, a city southeast of Philadelphia. In this letter, Christ speaks as the “Amen, the faithful and true witness,” and “the source of God’s creation.” These images refer to Christ’s Resurrection, which concludes the old age and begins the new. In the first chapter, Christ is referred to as the “faithful witness” (1:5), a trait found lacking in the church at Laodicea.

When Christ expresses what he knows of this church, he offers no praise but instead accuses them of being complacent, neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm and sickening enough to be spit out of his mouth. They are enjoying great wealth and look with pity on the other churches that are suffering, thankful that they themselves are not undergoing such misfortunes. Christ tells them that they are the ones who are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. He urges them to find true riches in gold refined by fire, symbolizing the suffering involved in being a true witness to Christ. They should cover themselves with white garments of dedication to Christ to cover their shameful nakedness. The white robes, a symbol of purity, will keep them from openly living in sin. He urges them to anoint their eyes with the oil of spiritual understanding so they may see what is true and good. Since these images portray suffering for Christ, Christ reminds them that chastisements and not riches are a true sign of their love.

Christ calls the church at Laodicea to a sincere change of life. An image of the new age is often presented as the banquet of the Lord. A banquet also has the deeper meaning of inviting a person into one’s life. Christ stands at the door and knocks, looking for the church of Laodicea to open and invite him into their life. When he does enter, he will share in the banquet of the new age with them. Those who are victorious by sharing their life with Christ will also share in Christ’s glory beside his Father’s throne.

This last letter to the church at Laodicea concludes with the same words as the previous six letters, calling those who read Christ’s words to bring them into their life.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

In the letter to Sardis, Christ declares those who are faithful will walk with the Lord, clothed in white. In the letter to Philadelphia, Christ leaves the door open to those who profess faith in him. In his letter to Laodicea, Christ stands at the door and knocks, looking for us to respond. All the letters in Revelation illustrate God's desire to come into our life. In the New Testament, Jesus tells us how often God takes the initiative. Jesus compared his followers to sheep and said, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

The author of Luke's Gospel tells a story about Jesus and a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. Since Zacchaeus was a small man, he had to climb a tree to see Jesus. As Jesus passed by, he looked up to Zacchaeus and told him he wanted to dine at Zacchaeus' house that day. Zacchaeus immediately gave his life to Christ, promising to give half of his possessions to the poor, and repaying fourfold anyone he cheated (see Luke 19:1–10). Jesus did not simply invite himself to Zacchaeus' house for a meal, but Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' life. Jesus, who stands at the door and knocks, said to his disciples, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you" (John 15:16).

✧ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 2: Vision of the Heavenly Court (4)

John previously experienced a vision that occurred while he was at Patmos. He now has a vision of an open door to heaven. In the opening chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet began his message when "the heavens opened" (Ezekiel 1:1). Many of the images found in the fourth chapter of John are similar to those found in Ezekiel 1.

The ancients pictured heaven as a vault-like structure with authentic doors. John, like Ezekiel, was about to witness special revelations surpassing human experience. John heard a voice, sounding like a trumpet, commanding him to ascend and learn what will take place in the future. The future John was

about to describe was not the future to the end of time but the future of the world in which he was living. He was not prophesying the end times.

John did not speak as though his body ascended into the heavenly realm, but he was caught up “in spirit” (4:2). He had a vision of heaven in which he saw a large throne and on the throne sat one whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian. John used images of precious jewels to describe God, perhaps to avoid comparing God to a human being. The image of a throne may represent the dominion of God over all others on earth who sit on thrones, such as the Emperor. Ezekiel spoke of a figure like a human being sitting on a throne (see Ezekiel 1:26). Daniel, the prophet, spoke of a vision in which he saw “the Ancient of Days” taking his throne (see Daniel 7:9). In accordance with Jewish tradition, John did not name God. The images of one “like a human being” and the “Ancient of Days” referred to God.

The Book of Ezekiel noted the splendor surrounding the Lord was like a rainbow in the sky (see Ezekiel 1:28). John described a rainbow, like an emerald, surrounded the throne. Around God’s throne were twenty-four other thrones on which sat twenty-four elders. The elders, who appeared to represent some type of heavenly council, were clothed in white garments and wore golden crowns on their heads, images accenting their share in heavenly glory. Just as elders belonged to the powerful councils on earth, so those who belonged to the council in heaven were elders. The number twenty-four may represent the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve companions of Jesus or Christians who have faithfully witnessed to Christ by their lives. Some commentators believe the number refers to the prophets of the Old Testament.

From the throne came forth flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, symbols of God’s power at work. Seven torches burned in front of the throne symbolizing the seven lampstands found in the Temple. The seven torches also represented the seven spirits, or guardian angels, of the churches. These seven spirits demonstrated God’s dominion over all the earth.

John described the floor surrounding the throne as being like a crystal-clear sea of glass. In the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet speaks of the firmament as being like crystal over the heads of the living creatures (see Ezekiel 1:22). In the story of creation in the Book of Genesis, God separated the water above the dome from the water below the dome (see Genesis 1:6–7). According to

the worldview of the day, the earth was flat, and God placed a dome on the earth to keep the waters above the dome separate from the waters below it. John pictured God as sitting over this water above the dome, with the water appearing to be like a sea of glass beneath his feet. This image also signified God's power over chaos and evil. In ancient times, many people viewed the sea as the abode of chaos and evil, yet, under God's feet, all evil becomes docile and calm.

Surrounding the throne of God were four living creatures covered with eyes front and back. Their numerous eyes symbolized the creatures seeing and understanding all things. The first creature resembled a lion, the second a calf, the third a human, and the fourth an eagle in flight. Many commentators believe that these symbols were originally images taken from the Babylonian signs of the zodiac. Ezekiel described four living creatures with all four faces on each of them, saying, "Their faces were like this: each of the four had a human face, and on the right the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox, and each had the face of an eagle" (Ezekiel 1:10). Each of the living creatures described in Revelation also had six wings, similar to the descriptions of the multiwinged creatures found in Ezekiel 1:6 and Isaiah 6:2.

Since the second century, St. Irenaeus, followed by other theologians, attached each of the symbols of the four creatures to the evangelists. They were depicted in art as having wings and appearing like the four creatures described in Revelation. Mark was the lion who begins his message with John the Baptist roaring in the desert. Luke was depicted as an ox (calf), a strong and hard-working animal, sacrificed as an offering, as was Jesus. Since Matthew began his Gospel with the human ancestry of Jesus going back to David, he was depicted as a human being. John was the eagle soaring toward the light, high above the earth, signifying Jesus as God become flesh.

In Revelation, John heard the creatures singing a song of praise to God, proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty..." similar to Isaiah 6:3. Instead of praising God as one for whom "all the earth is filled with his glory" (as in Isaiah 6:3), the creatures used the words found in Revelation 1:8 that spoke of God as "the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty." At the sound of this praise offered to God, the twenty-four elders, as a sign of submission, fell prostrate and worshiped God who lives forever.

They threw down their crowns, thus signifying their total submission to God and acclaimed the Lord God, as creator of all, was alone worthy of all honor, power, and glory because all things existed in accord with the will of God.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following passage:

John's message, like that of all apocalyptic writings, is highly imaginative and teaches an inspired message: God's power, love, and concern for all people. His writings are meant to encourage and fill us with hope. He is saying we should trust God who rules the world, even when all seems impossible. Although we are not always aware of God's love and power at work, people of faith believe God is present and active.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Day 3: The Scroll and the Lamb (5)

In the right hand of the one who sat on the throne, John saw a scroll that was sealed with seven seals and had writing on both sides of it. During John's era, scrolls were ordinarily papyrus scrolls used for manuscripts. After authors wrote their message on a scroll to be sent to someone, they would then seal it closed by imprinting an insignia pressed into the wax from a ring they wore. This would assure the recipients no one opened the scroll before they received it. In some cases, the insignia would represent a sign of authority if it came from a high official, and only those chosen could open the scrolls.

By saying there were seven seals on the scroll, John is affirming the scroll is perfectly sealed. John saw a powerful angel who asked in a loud voice who was worthy of opening the scroll. At the time Revelation was written, people pictured the world as having three tiers: heaven, earth, and the area under the earth. No one in any of these three tiers was worthy enough to open the scroll and examine its contents.

The image of secret scrolls already appeared in Old Testament apocalyptic writings. Ezekiel stated he received a scroll covered with writing on the front and back that spoke of lamentation, mourning, and woe (see Ezekiel 2:9–10). Daniel the prophet was told to seal a scroll (or book) until the end time (see

Daniel 12:4). John had an opposite experience. In Revelation, the angel presented a scroll needing to be opened. The opening of the scroll alluded to the arrival of the end times connected with the Second Coming of Christ. By opening the scroll, John's apocalyptic writing would fulfill the apocalyptic message of Daniel who sealed the scroll until the end time.

Representing the faithful who needed to have the scroll opened, John wept because no one was worthy enough to open it. An elder advised John not to weep, since the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, had conquered and won the right to open the scroll. The Root of David recalled the words of Isaiah 11:1, who proclaimed that a shoot shall sprout up from the stump of Jesse, that is, from the offspring of Jesse, David's father. David's offspring was the Christ, the messianic king. David and Jesus belonged to the lineage of the tribe of Judah. The image of Christ as the lion of the tribe of Judah recalled the prophecy of Jacob, as found in the Book of Genesis, in which Jacob declared Judah was growing up like a lion's cub (see Genesis 49:9).

John saw a Lamb standing between the throne and the four living creatures. Such a position placed the Lamb closest to the throne over every heavenly creature, thus demonstrating his place of preeminence over all. The Lamb was one that had been slain, a reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The slain lamb also recalled the words of Isaiah who spoke of the one who was to come as being led to the slaughter like a lamb (see Isaiah 53:7).

The Lamb seen by John had seven horns and seven eyes. The horns signified power. The eyes, which see all and know all, were the seven spirits sent to every part of the world. The number seven signified the perfection of the Lamb's power (horns) and knowledge (eyes).

The Lamb took the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne. The right hand was the hand of honor and respect. When the Lamb took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down in worship, affirming the Lamb shared in the power and glory of God. In the previous chapter, the twenty-four elders fell prostrate as the heavenly creatures praised God (4:8-10), and they did the same before the Lamb. Those who prostrate themselves before the Lamb carry harps as symbols of their praise and hold gold bowls filled with incense. In the Old Testament, harps were used to sing psalms and offer praise to God. The incense symbolized the prayers

and supplications of the all-faithful Christians as they praised the Lamb.

John witnessed the heavenly court singing a new song in honor of the Lamb, crying out he was worthy of receiving the scroll and breaking open the seals because he was slain and ransomed people from every tribe, language, people, and nation for God. In the Book of Isaiah, the prophet spoke of singing a new song to the Lord, as the Lord's glory and power became manifest (see Isaiah 42:10). The images of tribe, language, people, and nation in Revelation designated all the people of the world. They became a kingdom and were made priests to serve God. Since God controls the whole world, John was revealing those who were faithful would reign in God's kingdom on earth.

As the vision continued, everyone in the heavenly court—the angels, the living creatures, and the elders—joined in praising the Lamb. A countless number of people praised the Lamb who was slain, declaring the Lamb to be worthy of receiving all power, wealth, wisdom, strength, honor, glory, and blessing. The vision moved from the heavenly court to the entire universe, as John heard every creature in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea joining in praise of the one who sat on the throne and the Lamb. Everyone prayed that blessing, honor, glory, and might be given to God and the Lamb forever and ever. The creatures added their “Amen” to this dramatic and universal clamor of praise. The elders again fell down in worship.

Lectio Divina

Spend 8 to 10 minutes in silent contemplation of the following paragraph:

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist points Jesus out to two of John's disciples and refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” The evangelist writes, “The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God’” (John 1:35–36). Jesus is the new Lamb sacrificed to God in place of the sacrificial lamb shared in a common meal by the Jews during the feast of Passover. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is slain and raised to bring salvation to all people. He is the one worthy of all praise, glory, and honor. John, the author of Revelation, was most likely familiar with the Gospel of John and knew Jesus was the Lamb slain for all people.

✠ *What can I learn from this passage?*

Review Questions

1. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Sardis?
2. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Philadelphia?
3. What do we learn from Christ's message to the church in Laodicea?
4. Why was the Lamb the only one worthy of opening the scroll?
5. What does John see when his vision takes him to heaven?
6. What did the four living creatures look like?
7. How did some early Church writers connect the four evangelists with the four living creatures?
8. Why did the twenty-four elders throw down their crowns?