

Session 1: Seven Swans A-swimming

Rev 2:1 - 3:22

(Scripture references based on NIV)

1. Key Learning Points

- Jesus calls for all of us to remain faithful and endure until He returns
- We are assured that the unfaithful will face judgment while the faithful will be rewarded

2. Warm-up activity / Starter Question

If an angel were to write a letter to your small group or YM, what do you think the angel would write about (e.g. What would they observe? What would be the purpose of the letter)?

3. Opening Prayer

Lord, we thank you for giving us this time to learn more about your Word and grow together as a small group. Please open our hearts and minds to today's message and help us understand and reflect on today's passage. Amen.

4. Context

The information here is intended to be helpful contextual information for the leader. You may choose to share the points of greatest interest and importance for your group.

On Genre...

The book of Revelation contains three genres

- Apocalyptic
- Prophetic
- Letter

Apocalyptic genre

- Description
 - Mainly found between 250 BC to 250 AD in the Eastern Mediterranean.
 - Other books that include apocalyptic writings are Daniel, Joel, Zechariah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Matthew.

- Key characteristics of apocalyptic literature
 - Unveils divine mysteries or an unseen reality via visions, dreams, or heavenly journeys
 - Symbolic visions that are often highly dramatic and violent
 - Frequent emphasis of the end-times
 - Sometimes, a heavenly figure is present as a guide-interpreter
 - Makes connections between heavenly and earthly realities & present and future realities
 - Showcases the sovereignty and cosmic power of God
 - Involves non-linear storytelling, where scenes that are revealed chronologically do not necessarily occur chronologically
 - In this case, think about it in terms of what does John see next and not what happens next

Prophetic genre

- Prophecy means God's word through a prophet
- The book of Revelation describes itself as prophecy
 - Rev 1:3: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy ..."
 - Rev 22:7,10,18,19: "...the words of prophecy of this book/scroll"

Letter genre

- A good portion of the New Testament books are this genre:
 - letters to individuals (Titus, Philemon)
 - to a single church community (Corinthians, Galatians)
 - group of churches (1 Peter, James)
- Revelation is a letter to a group of churches
 - It is one letter meant to be read and circulated among a wide audience in different church communities
 - Rev 1:4 'John to the seven churches ...'
 - Rev 1:11 'Write in a book/scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches...'
 - Rev 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, etc. "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the *churches*"

So what?

- Apocalyptic genre: this genre sets the present moment, with all its ambiguity, in light of the unseen realities of the present and future
- Prophetic genre: contains elements of both foretelling and forth-telling (ie, it is not a prediction of the future)
 - Fore-telling describes blessings or punishments in the future
 - Forth-telling calls to action or responses for people in the present (e.g. a call to repentance right now)
- While Revelation comprises heavenly visions and end-times descriptors, it is not merely a prediction of the distant future nor just relevant for the 'final generation'. It is a call for a response of faith in and by every generation; its topics and themes are familiar and real to us now.

5. Scripture Reading

Reading all 3 chapters (Rev 1-3) is preferable but chapters 2 to 3 will be the key chapters.

Pick 3 volunteers to read one chapter out loud (standing is optional)!

6. Discussion / Exploration

Revelation 1

The content here is an overview and summary of Rev 1, which we will not explore deeply during this session. You can briefly share these details with your group.

Revelation 1 tells us about:

- Purpose of the book
 - Jesus shares the revelation of God to John, through an angel, who will share this vision because the time is near (v1-3).
- Author
 - written by John who saw a vision of Jesus (v9-18)
 - John was exiled to Patmos for being a follower of Christ (v9)
- Audience
 - seven churches in the province of Asia (v4)
- Who Jesus is
 - who is, who was, and who is to come, who saved us from our sins by his blood and brought us under his kingship (v4-6)

Brief Overview of Revelation 1

If you did not read Rev 1, you may read out this portion to set the context before looking at Rev 2-3.

- We see John get a vision.
- In this vision, John sees Jesus ('someone like a son of man') (v12-18) who instructs him to write seven letters addressed to seven churches, on one scroll (v10-11; 19-20).
- This one scroll will be sent to the seven churches (v11).
- Note that this is not seven separate scrolls, but one scroll containing all seven letters that will be sent to all seven churches.

Revelation 2-3

1) We will now look at the seven letters in more detail. Scan through the letters again. What do you notice about the structure of the letters? Supp: What is similar about the structure of the letters? Are there any repeated words, phrases, or ideas?

- Broad structure of each letter to the church
 - Description of Jesus (*Notice that the descriptions of Jesus in each letter is a call back to the description of Jesus in 1:13-16*)
 - Condition of the church (what is good/bad; pros/cons)
 - Instructions and / or encouragements
 - Consequences (good and bad; reward and punishment)
 - Call to hear / listen

2) Divide the small group into little groups (2-3 per group) and portion out the letters. Instruct each group to fill in the table for their letter on their own (10-15 mins) then come back as a small group to fill in the table together.

It might be helpful to have the empty table on a white board or screen and fill it in together. If needed, break down the first letter together as an example then split the group up to do the rest on their own.

<u>Church</u>	<u>Affirmations</u>	<u>Rebuke</u>	<u>Instructions</u>	<u>Consequences</u>
Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7)	<p>Hard work and perseverance (v2, 3)</p> <p>Endured hardship for the sake of Christ (v3)</p> <p>Not tolerated wicked people and false apostles (v2)</p> <p>They hate the practices of the Nicolaitans (v6) <i>(the teachings of the Nicolaitans were believed to have been similar to the that of Balaam - ate food for idols and committed sexual immorality)</i></p>	Forsaken the love they once had (v4)	<p>Reflect on how far they have fallen (v5)</p> <p>Repent and do the things they did at first (v6)</p> <p>Hear this message (v7)</p>	<p>Jesus will remove their lampstand (v5) -> no longer be a church (Rev 1:20 the seven churches are the seven lampstands)</p> <p>Right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (v7)</p>
Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11)	<p>Spiritually rich despite their material poverty (v9)</p> <p>Acknowledges their afflictions and their suffering under those who say they are Jews but are not (v9)</p>	-	<p>Do not be afraid of the suffering that will come and remain faithful despite the persecution (v10)</p> <p>Hear this message (v11)</p>	Those who endure will be victorious and will be safe from death (v11)

Pergamum (Rev 2:12-17)	Remained faithful despite Satan's presence & despite the martyring of Antipas (v13)	Some are holding to the teachings of Balaam and Nicolaitans (v14-15)	Repent (16) Hear this message (v17)	Judgment ('sword of my mouth') to those who do not repent (v16) Those who hear and obey will be rewarded (with eternal life) (v17)
Thyatira (Rev 2:18-29)	Love and faith, service and perseverance, doing more than before (v19)	Some tolerate Jezebel; tolerating and participating in sin (v20)	Repent of their ways (v22) Remain faithful and hold on until Jesus returns (v25) Hear this message (v29)	Jezebel and those who commit adultery with her will suffer and die (v22-23) Those who remain faithful will get to rule over the nations with Jesus (v26-28)
Sardis (Rev 3:1-6)	Some people in Sardis have remained pure / righteous / worthy (v4)	Spiritually dead / apathetic (v1) Unfinished deeds (v2)	Wake up, strengthen what remains and finish their unfinished deeds (v2) Be steadfast, holding onto Jesus' teachings and repent; listen and obey (v3) Hear this message (v6)	Those who do not wake up will be judged (v3) Those who are victorious ('dressed in white') will be with Jesus forever (v4-5)

Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13)	<p>Remained faithful despite being weak; faithful throughout persecution from jews (v8-9)</p> <p>Obedied and remained faithful (v10)</p>	-	<p>Jesus is coming, continue to endure (v11)</p> <p>Assurance that enduring is possible ('open door that no one can shut') despite their weakness (8)</p> <p>Hear this message (v13)</p>	<p>Eternal life with Jesus in the new creation (v12)</p> <p>Because they have endured patiently, they will not have to go through the hour of trial (v10)</p>
Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22)	-	<p>Lukewarm; apathetic (v15)</p> <p>Materially rich but spiritually poor; they do not realise that they are 'wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (v17)</p>	<p>Recognise their spiritual poverty and go to Jesus for spiritual sight and refining (v18)</p> <p>Be earnest and repent because Jesus rebukes and disciplines out of love (v19)</p> <p>Go to Jesus because he will answer (v20)</p> <p>Hear this message (v22)</p>	<p>Those who listen and repent will be with Jesus on His throne (v20-21)</p>

3) What are the differences and similarities amongst the letters? Supp: Why did Jesus have to address each church separately instead of addressing them together?

- Differences
 - All the churches are in different conditions and are facing different circumstances.
- Similarities
 - All the churches are given the same call to action - to listen, repent, and remain faithful.
 - All the churches are given the same promised outcome
 - Judgement and punishment for the unfaithful
 - Eternal life with Jesus in the new creation for the faithful

4) If you were one of the churches, how would you feel reading this letter? Supp: How would Jesus' description of your church make you feel? How would you feel reading the letters to the other churches?

This question is intended to help the reflection be a bit more personal.

- E.g. encouraged, called out, loved, motivated etc.

5) What do you think is the purpose of sending the letters in one scroll, instead of individual scrolls?

- To be encouraged that we are all pursuing faithfulness together as God's people, despite their different circumstances.
- No matter the state of your church, whether good or bad, Jesus' instructions and promise remain consistent and certain: if you repent and remain faithful, you will be rewarded.

7. Main Discipleship Takeaway

- Remain faithful and obedient despite difficulties and persecution because Jesus will reward the faithful and punish the unfaithful.

8. Application / Reflection questions

- 1) In chapters 2 and 3, we see that Jesus knows each church intimately. He does not just give a blanket diagnosis of the church, but is able to identify what some are doing well and what sinfulness others are struggling with. How does it make you feel to know that Jesus knows you intimately?
- 2) Which of the churches do you resonate with the most, and why? How does passage encourage and motivate us to endure and remain obedient?
- 3) Think back to our starter question. How can you encourage each other as a small group to persevere and remain faithful?

9. Closing Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the truths you have revealed to us today. Please give us the strength and discipline to remain steadfast despite the challenges and temptations we face, and let us continue to put our hope in the new creation. We thank you for this small group that we can journey with. Help us grow into a community that keeps each other accountable and encourages one another as we strive to remain obedient and faithful. In Jesus' name, Amen.