

Small Group Leaders Pit Stop

An Introduction To Revelation 1-3

Who?

1:1-2

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

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



Where?

1:9-11

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

When?

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

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

What?

In Groups:

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

God

- Eternal - 1:4
- Alpha and Omega - 1:8
- Son of Man - 1:12
- With his people - 1:12
- Robe and sash - priest - 1:13
- Hair white like wool - purity - 1:14

Jesus

- Faithful witness - 1:5
- Firstborn from among the dead - 1:5
- Ruler of the kings of the earth - 1:5
- Loves us - 1:5
- Freed us by his blood - 1:5
- Has made us a kingdom and priests to serve God - 1:6
- Deserving of all glory and power - 1:6
- Will come again in judgment - 1:7.
- Voice like a trumpet/ rushing waters - 1:10, 1:15
- All seeing eyes - 1:14
- Feet like bronze - purity - 1:15
- Holds churches - 1:16
- Sharp sword/words - 1:16
- Face shining like sun - power, beauty, purity - 1:16.
- First and last - 1:17
- Living One, was dead, now alive - 1:18
- Holds keys of death and hades - 1:18.

2. What is the big message in ch1?

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

How?

- Chapter 1 is a Prologue to the whole book

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

- The Old Testament is Key to the Imagery
e.g. Lampstands - 1:12 --> Zechariah 4:2-6. Son of Man - 1:13 --> Daniel 7, 10.
Lampstands - in Zech 4 they represent the temple and the faithful people of Israel.
Son of Man - doesn't really make sense without Daniel 7, 10 and also Jesus' use of the phrase to describe himself in the gospels.
Daniel 10 - see the similarities in how the two are described.
e.g. of football language - If I tell you that the Owls beat the Seagulls a few weeks ago you might think that I'm into some sort of horrible animal fighting sport. But if you know football then you'll know that I'm simply saying that Sheffield Wednesday beat Brighton. You need to know the language of football to know what I'm talking about. In the same way if we're going to start to understand the imagery of Revelation then we need to know the language and imagery of the OT.

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

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

- The Letters are linked to ch1
See 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14.
- The Letters are linked to the rest of Revelation
See 2:7, 11, 26-27; 3:5, 21, 21.

2:7--> 22:2

So What?

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

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

Recommended Books

Revelation Unwrapped by John Richardson

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

Revelation by Leon Morris

The Message of Revelation by Michael Wilcox

Small Group Leaders Notes

Revelation 1:1-8

Context

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

Structure

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

Revelation. There are lots of strange and difficult things in this book which we might be tempted to dismiss or ignore. John wants us to see that this book is not just human wisdom, instead it is all divine revelation and so we can trust it all.

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

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

- **The Church - Notice too what we are told about us.**

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

Tricky Bits

- ***What is meant by "Soon to take place" (v1) and "time is near" (v3)?***

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

- **What is meant by "the seven spirits" (v4)?**

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

Big Idea

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

Suggested Areas of Application

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

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

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

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

Digging into v1-3 (Observation and Interpretations Questions)

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

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

3. Why can we trust this Revelation?

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

4. What are we to do with this Revelation?

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

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

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

Digging into v4-8 (Observation and Interpretation Questions)

6. What are we told about;

• The Father

- *He's eternal (v4 & 8) - you may need to ask the group what is meant by "first and last" and "alpha and omega".*
- *He's king (v4) - notice that he's on the throne - it's not empty.*

• The Spirit

- *He's Perfect (v4) - seven*
- *He's before the throne - picks up the idea of him being before the Father on our behalf.*

• Jesus Christ

- *Faithful witness (5) - he's our example of remaining faithful to God even to death*
- *Firstborn from among the dead (v5) - he's risen and he will raise us too.*
- *He's King of everyone everywhere (v5) - great encouragement when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians.*
- *He loves us and has demonstrated his love by setting us free from our sins and making us a kingdom of priests (v6.)*
- *He will come again in judgment (v7)*

• Christians

- *We are loved by Jesus (v6)*
- *We have been set free from our sins (v6)*
- *We are a kingdom and priests (v6) (i.e. we are God's people who are called to serve God in his world.)*

Applying the whole passage (Application Questions)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Small Group Leaders Notes

Revelation 1:9-20

Context

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

Structure

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

because of the gospel (see Luke 5:1, 8:11, 8:21, 11:28 and Acts 4:31 for just a few of the examples that show us that this phrase refers to the gospel.) Notice how the phrase "word of God and testimony of Jesus" has already occurred in 1:2 to describe the contents of Revelation. Putting all this together tells us that at the end of the day Revelation is about the gospel! For all the weird imagery let's remember this as we study it. What we need most of all when suffering is to be reminded of the gospel and the results of the gospel. This is what will cause us to patiently endure.

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

we are being reminded that Jesus is one with the Father (John 10:30) and is the one who will judge all the living and the dead (we have already seen this theme in 1:7.)

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

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

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

Tricky Bits

- **What does John mean when he says that he was "in the Spirit"? (v10)**

- Various possibilities are given for this and I don't think we should get bogged down in trying to work it out. Most likely John was in some sort of Spirit-induced trance which made him ready to see the vision.

- **What is Hades? (v18)**
 - See Acts 2:27, 31. Both "the grave" and Hades refer to the place of the dead but not hell or the new creation. The important thing here is that it is lined up alongside death as an enemy, and yet it is a conquered enemy because the risen Jesus has the key.
- **What are the angels of the seven churches? (v20)**
 - The word could be messenger and so some people think that it could be referring to the Pastors/Leaders of the churches. Others think that it refers to the human messengers who would have carried the letter to the different churches. Both of these are quite possible and yet I think that the more likely explanation is that these are real angels who are representatives of the church. My reason for saying this is that later in Revelation 8:3-4 we see Angels acting as representative for Christians so it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the churches have angelic representatives. If this is the case then the churches are being reminded "that already a dimension of their existence is heavenly... and that they have help and protection in their struggle." (Beale.)

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

Suggested Areas of Application

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

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

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

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

Digging into v9-11 (Observation and Interpretation Question)

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

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

Digging into v12-16 (Observation and Interpretation Questions)

3. What does John see in v12-16?

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

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

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

Digging into v17-20 (Observation and Interpretation Questions)

5. What does Jesus say to John?

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

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

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

Applying v9-20 (Applications Questions)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Small Group Leaders Notes

Revelation 2:1-7 - Ephesus

Context

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

Structure

- ***v1 - A Description of Christ***
 - Picking up on 1:12-13 and 1:16 we are told that Jesus is the one who walks amongst his people and who holds his people firmly in his right hand. The implication of this is that Jesus is always in the midst of his people and thus he really does know all about their deeds, hard work, perseverance and sound doctrine (v2-3.) Yet because he is in their midst he also knows that the Ephesians have lost their first love. As a result v1 is both comforting and uncomfortable at the same time.
- ***v2-3 - Christ's Commendation of the Church***
 - Christ praises them for their hard work and their perseverance in the face of hardship (twice). He also commends them for how they have tested out false teachers and do

not tolerate wickedness. As previously mentioned this seems to show that they had responded to Paul's warning and letters. It highlights for us that there are times when it is good for churches to be intolerant. This might be shocking in our society today but Jesus commends them for being intolerant of false teaching and wickedness. Although the primary focus is rightly on how they have lost their first love we should also recognise that hard work, perseverance and sound doctrine are commended in this letter and so we should strive for them. We should be as sharp as possible at spotting error and challenge wickedness whenever and wherever we see it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tricky Bits

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

- It is hard to know much about this group but clearly Jesus wasn't a fan (see v6)!!! They also crop up in 2:15 where they are likened to the group of people who hold to the teaching of Balaam. The word "likewise" in 2:15 suggests that the Nicolaitans, like the Balaam group, promoted eating food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality.
- This would fit with what we know about Ephesus where because of the temple there would have been a big pressure on Christians to be involved in the idolatry and sexual immorality that was associated with the temple. The temple would have not just been a place for religious worship, it was also a social and business centre and so if as a Christian you disassociated yourself from the temple then you were cutting yourself off socially and financially. As a result there would no doubt have been a strong pressure and temptation to go along with the pagan practice of eating food sacrificed to idols and sleeping with the temple prostitutes. Throughout the New Testament it is made clear that this is not acceptable Christian living (see Acts 15:20.)
- **What was their first love?**
 - This is the big question of the passage and the answer we give will dramatically shape the application of the passage. There seem to be three main interpretations.
 - Firstly some people think that this refers to their love for each other. As a result Jesus is complaining that they have stopped loving each other. This is certainly not impossible.
 - Secondly others suggest that Jesus is complaining that they have lost their love for him. Again this is very possible.
 - Thirdly it could be that when Jesus says they have lost first love he means that "they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus by witnessing to him in the world." (Beale.) I think that this interpretation is correct for the following reasons.
 - First, look at how Jesus introduces himself to the church in v1. He reminds them that he walks among the lampstands. Remember how we have said that the lampstands represent the people of God and that a key part of being the people of God, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, is that we are to be a witnessing light to the world.
 - Second, look at what Jesus threatens to do if they do not repent in v5. He threatens to remove their lampstand. This is the only church that is threatened with such a measure which should make us ask why? Beale argues that the punishment (removal of the lampstand) fits the sin (failing to be a light to the world.) This also fits with Jesus' reference to be a light in the New Testament. Turn to Mark 4 and notice the similarities with what Jesus is saying in Revelation 2:4-6. Notice in Mark 4:21 how Jesus implies that the church is a light and that like all other lights our light is not to be hidden away but to be put out for all to see. Notice too how in v25 he says that "whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them." This has strong connections with Revelation 2:5 where he threatens to take away their lampstand. Finally notice how Jesus' words in Mark 4:23 that "whoever has ears let him hear" is very similar to Jesus' words in Revelation 2:7 "Whoever has ears..."
 - Thirdly, the interpretation that their first love was not just to do with their love for Jesus but was a bigger thing to do with their evangelism fits with Jesus' call to "repent and do the things you did at first" (v5.) They are a hard working church so the issue is not one of laziness, the issue is that they had stopped doing something vital. They had stopped being a light to the world as an expression of their love for Jesus.
 - In summary this means that it is not wrong to say that their first love was love for Jesus but it is more than that. Their first love was love for Jesus expressed in

evangelistic zeal. If you really love someone then you want to tell people about them. In summary Jesus is saying that if they don't start being a light to the world then he will come and snuff out their light because what's the point of a lamp if you hide it away for no-one to see. The point of the church is to be a light to the world. Back in 1:6 we were told that through Christ's death on the cross he has made us to be a kingdom and priests. As we said back in chapter 1 that means that we are to talk to God on behalf of the world but it also means that we are to talk to the world on behalf of God. When a church stops doing this then it's abandoned its reason for existing and so Jesus will come and remove the church.

Big Idea

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

Suggested Areas of Application

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

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

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

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

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

2. How does Jesus describe himself? (v1)

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. What does Jesus not like about the church?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Putting all this together we see that to lose your first love does not just refer to not loving people and it is not just love for Jesus. Their first love was their love for Jesus expressed in their evangelistic zeal. They have lost this and so they have stopped being a light to the world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Applying the passage (Application Questions)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Small Group Leaders Notes

Revelation 2:8-11 - Smyrna

Context

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

Structure

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

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

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

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

Tricky Bits

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

Big Idea

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

Suggested Areas of Application

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

Suggested Bible Study

Starter Question

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

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

Digging into the Passage (Observation and Interpretation Questions)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Applying the Passage (Application Questions)

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

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

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

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

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

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