

1 Peter 1:3-12

FOCUS ATTENTION: Every four to six weeks, I receive a newsletter from two of our International Mission Board partners serving in south Asia. In a recent communiqué, we were asked to pray for an indigenous pastor and his family. Interrupting a recent worship service, radical opponents pulled him from the rented meeting site and beat him with sticks and fists. The police arrested the pastor (rather than his attackers) once they arrived on scene. The same day, radicals vandalized the pastor's home and business. Other church leaders have raised financial support for his family and his legal expenses. At last report, he remained in police custody and under a physician's care. The Gospel and Gospel people are not well received in this land though its constitution proclaims religious freedom for its citizens.

Peter's first-century world also included 'hard places' where Christ-followers were persecuted and even martyred. First-century Christians faced opposition from civil, religious, and cultural systems. His two New Testament letters were written to encourage faithfulness and perseverance in the face of such opposition. Today we will consider the opening verses of 1 Peter, where the Apostle extols the Promise-keeping God whose mercy and grace provide perseverance and hope in hard times.

Essence of the Text

Man's only hope for rescue and redemption from sin is trusting in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

The New Testament books of 1 and 2 Peter are considered as the writings of Simon Peter to the churches of Asia Minor in the mid-late First Century. As one of the original Twelve Disciples of Jesus, Peter was an eyewitness to the completed work of Christ, from Galilee to Calvary to the Mount of Ascension to Pentecost. He was also among the first to be persecuted for his faith by religious and political forces.

His experience made him uniquely qualified to instruct and encourage Jesus followers throughout Asia Minor who were suffering threat and deprivation because of their faith in Jesus. A recurring theme in both letters is that there is hope in Jesus for rescue, redemption, and enduring strength for each day, regardless of the scope or severity of persecution. In 1 Peter 1:3-12, Peter reminds his readers of the present

and future security believers have when trusting in Jesus. This was Good News in the First Century, and it is still Good News today! No matter what life brings, believers have hope because of Jesus' completed work!

The Salutation of the Epistle of 1 Peter is typical for First Century written communication, as Peter introduces himself and identifies the intended recipients of the teaching that is to follow. The addressees include "exiles" [presumably from Palestine] who have relocated to five Roman provinces in Asia Minor [present-day Turkey]. Persecution, either governmental, religious, or economic, has followed them from their homes and Peter is determined to encourage them. He will do this by recounting what God has done [redemption], is doing [sanctification], and will yet do [glorification] in Christ. Because of these past, present, and future realities, the persecuted Church is called to rest in the hope of the Gospel.

1 Peter 1:3-5: Mercy that Sustains

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

v. 3 In hard times, human tendency is to focus only on those moments and the related burdens of that season of life. In fact, this negative 'leaning' is so strong that we often bookmark our life stories with instances of loss, major illness, etc. Peter begins his encouragement of the early Church by calling them to join him in praising God the Father for His unmerited favor revealed in His Son, Jesus. He calls upon these hurting believers to focus on the promise of the future and not the trouble of the present. History has no greater example of perseverance and victory in the face of persecution and seeming defeat than the resurrection of Jesus. What's more, God's mercy for every moment for every believer is revealed in Christ's resurrection. Peter says this redemptive mercy, purchased on the cross and assured by the empty tomb, "...has caused us..."

- "...to be born again...". Peter voices a concept first expressed by Jesus Himself in a late-night theological discussion with a learned Jew, Nicodemus (John 3:1-21). Jesus explains that this 'new birth' is not physical, but spiritual, and results in a right relationship between the Holy God and a 'newly birthed' person. Perseverance in the face of persecution is assured to the one who

is 'born again' since pain, death, and the grave cannot hold those born of the Spirit. Assurance in the moment [born again] is guaranteed because we are born to something greater than now-

- "...a living hope....". Peter calls upon his audience to remain faithful and endure the moment because something better lies ahead. "In Peter's thought, this... is not a forlorn and dead hope. Its very foundation is one of life...As in all early Christian thinking, so here, the foundation of hope for a new life now and beyond death is the resurrection of Jesus Christ." (Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 12. p. 150. Broadman, Nashville, 1971)

Vv. 4-5 In describing for these persecuted saints the surety of God's mercy, Peter continues to detail facets of that mercy as one might look at a gemstone. Being born again has both present and future aspects; being held by a living hope speaks to promises yet fulfilled. Peter says in verse 4 that God's mercies also bring "...an inheritance... kept in heaven for you...". Hardship now may deplete energy, resources, and even end life, but the faithful are assured of great reward in the future. Peter uses three descriptive words to classify this inheritance as being enduring, perfect, and immutable. While scripture does not detail this 'inheritance' for us, it is wondrous to look at how Paul quotes Isaiah 64:4 to express what lies ahead for believers:

"...no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined what God has prepared for those who love Him..."

-1 Corinthians 2:9 (ESV)

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- There are likely class members who became Christians as adults. Invite them (Teacher, you should probably invite before the session) to describe the difference in facing adversity as a believer versus a non-believer. Discuss.
- Ask, how does knowing you have a new life, a living hope, and a heavenly inheritance impact how you face life today? How can these assurances, grounded in Christ's resurrection, energize and enable us when facing life's challenges?

1 Peter 1:6-9: Love that Endures

⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith--more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire--may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen

him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Vv. 6-7 Peter is writing to the believers of these five provinces for he has heard of their suffering; but he has also heard of their maturing faith. He does not command them to rejoice in suffering, nor does he urge them to only rejoice in its absence. A possible translation here is "You are already rejoicing..." (writer's translation). Peter knew what it was to rejoice in suffering (see Acts 5:41), and he commends the attitude and endurance of these Christ-followers who are persisting "...for a little while... [even though] you have been grieved". The wording here can speak to both the duration and the severity of the grief endured. Peter encourages that there is significant opportunity in these assorted "...trials...". The use of the word for trials here can have one of two results: trials rightly faced can be harmless at best and opportunity for growth at worst. Trials wrongly met become temptation to sin or headlong rush into evil. The difference is not in the duration or severity of the trial; the difference is how one responds to the trial(s). (Robertson, A. T. Word Pictures of the New Testament, vol. VI. p. 11, 50. Broadman, Nashville, 1931).

Peter concludes this encouragement on facing trials by proposing that such testing, once endured in faith, becomes a treasure more valuable than fine gold [which is only produced in the refiner's fire]. Such faith, refined in the fires of persecution, brings "...praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Peter knew something that we still struggle to grasp today: the believer's life is always, always, ALWAYS meant to honor Jesus.

Vv. 8-9 The thought of the life-changing fact of the resurrection of Jesus seems to launch Peter into a spontaneous moment of rejoicing and praise of the Jesus that his audience has "...not seen...and do not now see Him...". He is not silently boasting of having seen Jesus while the believers of Asia Minor were not eyewitnesses. On the contrary, Peter is rejoicing in the glorious fact that these people have heard, repented, and believed, thereby "...obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." It is as if Peter were thinking to himself how fortunate for him (Peter) to see, to hear, to touch, and to be with Jesus, thereby believing. Now these people have repented and believed, trusting in a spiritual first-hand revelation so powerful that they placed faith in Jesus and received salvation in Him. For Peter, his Asia Minor audience, and us today, there should be great joy in repenting and believing when spiritual eyes are opened to the Truth of Jesus and His resurrecting power.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- It has been said that trials endured will make us either bitter or better. Invite members to remember and share accounts of trying times that grew their faith. Pray, thanking God for enduring mercy that brings enduring faith.
- Our world is filled with hurting people. Some hardships are self-inflicted, while others occur as a function of life. How can Peter's model of encouragement guide us in aiding and supporting others who are hurting?

1 Peter 1:10-12: Salvation that Persists

¹⁰ Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully,¹¹ inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.¹² It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Repeatedly through the last eleven-plus months, we have come upon passages of Holy Scripture that speak of heavenly promises made and fulfilled. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter continues his words of encouragement by reflecting on God's trustworthiness of His promises fulfilled in the Unfolding Story. Peter wants these believers, enduring troubled times, to see that the God Who makes and keeps promises of salvation through faith is also able to bring glory out of suffering, and that is Good News!

Vv. 10-12 Peter may not have had the Jewish education of Paul, but even a Galilean fisherman knew that the God of Israel was and is the God of Kept Promises. Peter assures the Asia Minor Christians that "...this salvation..." [their salvation] had been promised by "... the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours...." YHWH Himself had identified Israel as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Ex. 19:6). Isaiah extended that saving news to the varied nations of earth (Isa. 42:6; 49:6; 52:10; 60:3). Jesus self-identified as the fulfillment of all these prophecies (Mk. 1:15), and in the Book of Acts we see the power of the Holy Spirit reveal the redemption of the nations at Pentecost (Acts 2).

Peter asserts that these prophecies concerned Christ's "... sufferings...subsequent glories..." and "...the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news...". God's stamp of approval, shown through time and His revealed Word, substantiated that salvation is meant for Jew and Gentile alike. Based on this great gift of mercy [removal of judgment] and grace [redemption from sin], Peter's friends in Asia Minor could persevere and be victorious even in the face of suffering. The fulfillment of such promises is so astounding that it has become like "...things into which angels long to look." Though they are constantly in the presence of the Promise-keeping God, the heavenly beings are in awe of the manifest mercy and grace given to those who hear, repent, and believe the Good News.

This living hope (1 Peter 1:3) is sufficient in good times and hard times. This hope redeems, sustains, persists, and it conquers all that life may bring- all to God's Glory!

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How has our year-long journey through The Unfolding Story strengthened your belief in God's Word and your trust in His yet-to-be-fulfilled Promises?
- How can God's history of promise-keeping encourage us today when life's challenges come our way?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

- Our God keeps promises.
- His greatest promise, revealed in Jesus, redeems those who repent and believe.
- His fulfilled promises and His future promises can encourage and enable believers living in good times and in hard times.

Next Week - Hebrews 11:1-12:3

Hebrews 11:1-12:3

Focal: Hebrews 11:1-7, 11:39-12:3

FOCUS ATTENTION: One commonality in the New Testament is that from the Book of Acts through the Book of Revelation, Holy Spirit-inspired writers addressed how faithfulness to Jesus provides sustaining mercy and grace in times of challenge and difficulty. Three weeks ago, we saw how Paul wrote Galatians to encourage faithfulness to Jesus despite the temptation to add Jewish ritual to redeeming faith. Two weeks ago, we studied a portion of Paul's letter to the Roman church encouraging participation in the shared task of making the Gospel known to our world, despite opposition. Last week, we considered Peter's message of perseverance in the face of persecution to Christians in Asia Minor. Today, we turn to the Book of Hebrews and will find a community of believers that were tempted to incorporate Jewish ritual and legalism into their newfound faith in Jesus. The Preacher (the title we will use for the unnamed author(s) of Hebrews) writes to demonstrate the overwhelming sufficiency of Jesus as Messiah, prophet, priest, and King. He calls upon his readers to simply "Look to Jesus!"

There continues to be broad discussion and opinion as to the authorship, the recipients, and date/time of this book. There is better agreement that the book uses some of the most sophisticated Greek vocabulary in the New Testament; that it is written to Christians with significant Jewish backgrounds; and, that it was likely a sermon or sermon collection that was shared among several first-century churches. The compelling theme is that total commitment to Christ leaves no room (and no reason) to return to the ritual and restriction of Jewish legalism. Jesus' perfect sacrifice at Calvary snuffed the fires of the bronze altars of the Tabernacle and Temple. The Lamb of God's once-for-all atonement on the cross made further blood-letting of lambs or expulsion of goats meaningless. Finally, Jesus- a high priest, mediator, and intercessor after the example of Melchizedek, provided a perfect 'Aaron' and a perfect 'Moses' to bring believers into right standing with a holy God.

Essence of the Text

Faith in Jesus brings salvation to life, endurance for life, and hope after life.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Hebrews 11 has received a unique identifier among the thirteen chapters of the Book. Often called "the Roll Call of Faith" or "Hall of Faith", the Preacher here provides examples from Jewish history in defining, exemplifying, and perfectly depicting the faith that pleases God and brings salvation. We will examine three passages from Hebrews 11-12 that will ultimately point us to Jesus, as originator of faith and the completion of faith that brings salvation. Hebrews 11 defines and illustrates the kind of faith to which Christians are called, and what such faith brings to life.

Hebrews 11:1-3: Faith Defined

¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³ By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

Faith is a truism of life that cannot be defined in words, phrases, simile, or metaphor. We can best define faith by what it does. "One can see faith demonstrated more easily than one can define it..." (Dean, Robert J. Hebrews: Call to Christian Commitment, p. 97. Convention Press, Nashville, 1985).

v. 1 We've often heard it said that "seeing is believing", but that is not true. To see is only to recognize and identify what people hold as fact. The Preacher describes faith as two concepts based on the sufficiency and trustworthiness of God:

- "...the assurance of things hoped for...". For the Christian, hope is a mainstay of both the now and the not yet. In the "now", the person who trusts in Christ has the assurance that any given moment in life can be faced with a confident heart made sure by Jesus' promise that "no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:28c, ESV). Concerning the "not yet", Jesus also said, "...I give them eternal life, and they will never perish..." (John 10:28a-b, ESV). In essence, faith is a solid certainty (both present and future) in the promises of God, fulfilled in Jesus.

- "...the conviction of things not seen...". Faith also finds certainty in that which we cannot see. What does this mean? With spiritual eyesight filtered through faith, we see not only the empty cross and empty grave, but we see the victory won by Christ in the spiritual realm (things not seen). The Preacher is asserting that

Christians can have confident trust in the One who exercises dominion in the spiritual realm. Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 1:19-21 (ESV):

“...what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.”

So, faith is certainty which comes from trusting God's sovereign reliability in both the now and the not yet, based on what He has done; what He is doing; and what He has promised to do!

Vv. 2-3 The Preacher proposes that this certainty of God's hold on the now and the not yet has been reason for people, even in ancient days, to receive "...commendation..."

Military personnel and first responders may receive commendations [medals, certificates, letters of note, etc.] for distinguished performance. In the same way, those who 'faith' God are honored by God for believing Him.

The universe is staggering in its size and complexity. The Preacher sees our acceptance of God as its Source as an overarching demonstration of faith. While it may confound reason or human thought, we know that by His Word, God spoke the universe into existence, bringing everything out of nothing (Gen. 1:1ff). "By faith in God's Word we know for a certainty that every star was created by God- all 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (i.e., ten octillion)!" (Hughes, R. Kent. Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul. Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2015).

Confidence that God can form all things from no thing is "faithing" God as the Source of all that there has been, is, and will be. Ray Frank Robbins, a beloved Professor of New Testament at New Orleans Seminary, often counseled students: "It is improper to say we have 'faith in God', because faith should never be considered as a noun [person, place, or thing]. By trusting God and His Word we are 'faithing' God, living in response to what He has done, is doing, and will continue to do. Faith is an action word!"

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Reflecting on the last eleven-plus months of study in The Unfolding Story, what are some stories and who are some characters that we have studied whose actions demonstrated a living faith in God's promises? Discuss.

- What are actions or steps we can take today to demonstrate a trust in God's promises for both the now and the not yet?

Hebrews 11:4-7: Faith Exemplified

⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commanding him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

⁷ By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Apparently, a simple definition of "faith" was also a challenge for the first century! The Preacher determines that the best way to define "faith" is to offer examples to his readers and listeners of faith in action. He immediately provides three succinct Old Testament examples of faithful response to God.

v. 4 Worshipping God. The Preacher turns to Genesis 4 and considers the example of Abel. His sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock before the LORD God was looked upon with favor ("regard", Gen. 4:4), whereas Cain's presentation of "...the fruit of the ground..." (Gen. 4:3) was a portion (not the first or the best) of his harvest and not well received. Worship is an act of faith where we give God our best in time, talent, treasure, and attention. Acts of worship, such as praying, giving, praising, listening, and applying demonstrate faith towards God. The Preacher even proposes that worshipful acts still speak of 'faithing' God even after the worshipper is silenced by death. Faith is demonstrated in worshipping God and results in commendable, authentic righteousness (being made right and declared right).

Vv. 5-6 Walking with God. In Genesis 5:21-24 we find reference to one of the most enigmatic characters in the Bible: Enoch. He lived before the time of Noah; he lived for 365 years; he walked with God; and then he was not, for God took him.

The Scripture infers that Enoch did not face death. Why? It wasn't because of when he lived; after Enoch, the world's

evil would be so great the Lord sent the floods. It wasn't because of his long life; others, including his own son Methuselah, lived longer. God took Enoch because Enoch walked with God. The Hebrew word for walk is halak, which means to go; to be in step with; commune with; or behave. It does not carry an idea of direction, only of movement. (Vines, W. E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, Revised. p. 279ff. Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1996.) Enoch's faith was expressed by being in step with God. He did not try to get ahead of God; he did not fall behind; he did not stop to see the sights but did yield when God said wait. He walked with God. It is hard to identify any behavior or action that expresses faith so clearly as the action of walking with God. What a timeless example of faith!

Enoch's faith was commended, and the Preacher determines this is a fitting place to identify such faith that "...pleased God." Pleasing God is easier to define than faith; pleasing God means a person sees and honors God for Who He is and what He does. Continuing, the Preacher says that such a walk of faith draws one near to God; it is grounded in a belief in God; and it brings reward.

v. 7 Obeying God. A third quick example of 'faithing' God is found in the life and work of Noah. In Genesis 6-9, we find the first extended faith example in the Old Testament through the obedience of Noah. Noah was 500 years old before his sons were born (Gen. 5:32). Sometime afterwards, in the midst of growing evil and wickedness on the earth, Noah found favor in God's eyes (Genesis 6:8) and would begin the construction of the ark. The floods would come when Noah was 600 years old (Gen. 7:6).

Noah received God's favor (a similar idea to the 'commendation' of Heb. 11:2) because his faith in God was expressed through obedience to God. Genesis 6 describes Noah's contemporaries as being "wicked" and "evil". Both these words for sin carry the idea of knowing right but rejecting it, which is an operative meaning of disobedience. Conversely, Noah 'faithed' God by obedience. Noah obeyed by building the ark; he obeyed by gathering the animals to be preserved; he obeyed by collecting food for his family and the animals; he obeyed by taking his household into the ark; he obeyed- "And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him." (Gen. 7:5).

Noah's faith response was in direct opposition to the response of all the other people in the antediluvian world. Human response to God was disobedience, and when compared to Noah's 'faithing' God, it "...condemned the world..." to destruction. Meanwhile, Noah "...became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." as his faith

was lived out in obedience that brings one into right standing with God.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How can we 'faith' God today through worship?
- How can we 'faith' God today through walking with Him?
- How can we 'faith' God today by obeying Him?

Hebrews 11:39-12:3: Faith Perfected and Personified

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Time does not allow us to explore all the examples of a living faith found in Hebrews 11:1-12:3. We have seen faith defined; we have seen faith exemplified; now we must consider faith as it is perfected and personified. While Hebrews 11:1-38 provides a litany of examples of faith in action, it does not exhaust or perfect the biblical examples.

Vv. 39-40. These verses are transitional in nature, as they figuratively 'tie a bow' around the examples of faith in action and faith's results. Further, we will see here that "...something better..." stands as a perfect, eternal example of faith in action for those living on this side of the Christ event. The Preacher re-visits the fact that the faith described in 11:1-38 is "... commended...", yet commendation is not a perfect outcome of faith. There is "...something better..." that awaits those who 'faith' God through Jesus, because in Him faith is both perfected and personified.

Vv. 1-3 Often, the Bible compares the Christian life to an athletic contest. Paul was especially fond of this analogy. Here, the Preacher challenged his readers to picture themselves as athletes who were competing in a race (Dean, p. 112) and the grandstands around the field of competition are filled with "...so great a cloud of witnesses..." who are more than spectators. In this analogy,

these 'spectators' were once 'competitors' themselves. They were witnesses, in both their own lives and the lives of others around them, of the temporal and spiritual realities of faith in action. These 'witnesses' bear testimony of perseverance and commendation that result from a life of faith. Furthermore, their faith legacy can provide encouragement to those still competing in the life of faith.

The Preacher then calls upon the current competitors to "...lay aside... and let us run...". They must discard anything that might hinder, discourage, or detract as they continue to compete in the race of faith. "Weight..." here likely referred to laying aside the heavy burden of Jewish law (a temptation repeatedly addressed in Hebrews), while "...sin..." references missing the mark or goal. The readers of Hebrews are challenged to focus on the true prize, the ultimate goal: "...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...".

In Chapter 11, the Preacher had pointed to many biblical figures as examples of a faith in God lived out by attitudes, practices, and behaviors. In Hebrews 12:1-3, he turns to the perfect example of a life of faith: Jesus. All the earlier examples were common people struggling with the weight of sin to live a life of faith; but in Jesus, we can see a perfect life of perfect faith in a perfect God with a perfect result. We are encouraged to "...look to Jesus... so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted." Jesus' example of perseverance, endurance, and complete faith in God returned Jesus to heaven's throne where He rules and reigns as the perfect example of 'faithing' God.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Texas A & M has 'the Twelfth Man' at Kyle Field and Duke has 'the Cameron Crazies' at Cameron Indoor Stadium. Both student groups encourage the home team. Invite class members to recall and describe people (past and present) whose example of faithful living is an encouragement to them as they 'faith' God. Discuss.
- Reflecting on the Gospel record, invite class members to identify moments or events in the life of Jesus that encourage them to "not grow weary or fainthearted." Discuss how Jesus' life of 'faith in action' can encourage believers today.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

- Christ Followers can be encouraged in their walk of faith by the examples of both Old and New Testament people who responded to God in faith.
- Believers can encourage other believers as living examples of walking in faith.
- Jesus is the perfect model we need for living a life of 'faithing' God.

Next Week - 1 John 4:7-12

1 John 4:7-12

FOCUS ATTENTION: In the New Testament, there are two soaring passages that address the paramount element of the Christian experience: Love. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Paul closes his description of the love-life shared in the Christian community with God and one another this way: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." For Paul, the ultimate expression of life in Christ is found in love. While John's treatment of love in the Christian context is longer (1 John 4:7-5:12), he is more concise: "...God is love." (1 Jn. 4:8).

In John's Gospel, Jesus is quoted this way: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35). Today, on this Third Sunday of Advent, we focus on how we identify God's love; how we experience God's love; and how we are to share God's love.

Essence of the Text

God's ultimate expression of love for man is found in Jesus, through whom we can love God and love others.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

As the second-most prolific New Testament writer (behind the Apostle Paul), John, Son of Thunder (Mk. 3:17) would be used by the Holy Spirit to record for us the Gospel of John; 1, 2, 3 John; and the Book of Revelation. Tradition holds that John may have been one of the youngest disciples and that he would live late into the first century while writing the Revelation from exile on Patmos (John. Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary. Holman, Nashville, 2015). John's Gospel provides a thematic record of Jesus' life and teaching; the Revelation provides a message of hope in Jesus' dominion and return in the face of persecution; and the three personal letters challenge the Early Church to steadfast hope based on God's love revealed in Jesus.

While 1 John lacks the organization of John's Gospel and imagery of the Revelation, it points Christ followers to a life of complete joy (1:4) by avoiding sin now (2:1) and holding fast to the promise of eternal life to come (5:1). We do not know the identity or location of the intended recipients of 1 John but can deduce that John had an intimate awareness of these people and the church(es). He identifies them as "My little children" (2:1); "Beloved" (2:7; 4:1,7,11); "Little children" (2:12,28); and "Children" (2:18). These terms show John had a great affinity and sensed a parental responsibility for these people.

Varied forms of the Greek words agape and agapao occur in 1 John over two dozen times, and always address God's action towards believers; believers' action towards God; or believers' actions towards one another. (Arndt and Gingrich. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, pp. 4-6. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957). It is obvious that love, specifically a God-focused love, is the theme of the letter.

1 John 4:7-8: God Is Love

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

John 4:1-6 presents dire warnings to the church or churches who are intended to read and apply this letter. The recipients are admonished that they should not find confidence in everything they see and hear but are to "...test the spirits to see whether they are from God...". Confession of faith in Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, brings God's Truth to bear in the lives and hearts of Christ-followers. Faithful witness is found only in what God has done through Christ Jesus, and to that Truth believers are to remain faithful.

v. 7 John uses a term of endearment, "Beloved...", and immediately calls upon his readers to "keep on loving" (writer's translation). The love referenced is not an emotion or fleeting fascination; it is a devotion born of trust, durability, and reliability. This is love born of an intimate knowledge of God's love for people and His desire that His love be spread and shared. John says that this brand of love, which is both sustaining and sacrificial, has only one Source: God. He continues: "...whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." God is not only the Source of such love, but He is the Supplier of that love to those who are born of God and know God. This New Birth is what Jesus taught of in John 3 and knowing God personally is the relationship Jesus spoke of between Himself and His sheep (John 10:14,27).

v. 8 John wants his readers to understand that just as surely as love comes from God and is supplied by God to those who know God, the opposite is tragically true. "Anyone who does not love does not know God..." may be one of the saddest facts of life. We may encounter infatuation, fascination, kindness, generosity, affection, or lust in life. However, true love, the love we were created to enjoy, is only experienced by knowing the Source of love and receiving His endless supply of love expressed in the sacrificial love of Jesus.

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED

December 17, 2023

It is impossible to know the love we were created to experience unless we "...know God...". How then can we know God? Paul says we can know God (and His love) by looking at what He has done: "...but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:8). John describes God's love this way in 1 John 4:14: "...And we have seen and testify that the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world." We can know God and experience His love by looking to and trusting in the redeeming work of His Son, Jesus.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Invite class members to recall a person or persons they could call today with a need or problem and that person would immediately respond by coming alongside to assist, no matter the cost. Encourage responses. Stress that this brand of love (greatly magnified) is the sort of love God has for us and desires us to share with others.
- Invite class members to provide one-word descriptions of their understanding of God's love. Record on a board or tear-sheet. Point out how language fails us for we only see God's perfect love in His Son.

1 John 4:9-10: God's Love in Action

⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

To gain a clear understanding of God's sacrificial, redeeming kind of love in action, we need to consider Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:45-48 about loving our enemies:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

v. 9 Sin turns people into enemies of God as we reject His rightful rule and reign in our lives. (Romans 5:10a). Amazingly, God's perfect response to our rebellion is to love us! In fact, John says God's love "...was made manifest among us..." which means it was fully unveiled when "

...God sent his only Son into the world...". Throughout The Unfolding Story of Scripture, we have seen God's love for people shown in His mighty acts of patience, redemption, vindication, rescue, and love. Moreover, when we reciprocate God's love for us by loving Him in return, "...we...live through him." John will later write in marvelous visionary language (in the Revelation) that this life of love we receive through Jesus is both temporal and eternal. For the one who loves God, there is strength and encouragement for a life that conquers death which then receives an eternal future. Jesus brings both life and life everlasting!

v. 10 Based on the facts that (1) love is from God (4:7); (2) God is love (4:8); and (3) God's love is perfected in Jesus (4:9), John concludes that God loves us in spite of and not because of who and what we are. God's love for us is not conditional upon our love for Him. In fact, the Unfolding Story has shown us that in His Covenant Love, God has placed all the burden for love upon Himself: "God ...sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins... . In return all who repent and believe are granted all the benefits of that love! The Greek word hilasmos is translated as propitiation (ESV) here and in 1 John. 2:2. The use of this word "...is not convey the idea of appeasing one who is angry toward another but of altering or removing the cause of alienation...The sinner is reconciled to God, but God does the reconciling by providing in Christ the means of reconciliation. In Christ's death the cause of the sinner's enmity toward God is removed and his approach to God made possible through his union with Christ... ." (Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 12, p. 199. Broadman, Nashville, 1972). Christ's work of love through His death and resurrection doesn't simply hide or cover sin, it removes the offense just as the Psalmist said: "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalm 103:12, ESV).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Lead the class to reflect on the Unfolding Story and identify events or actions where people acted as 'enemies' of God yet by God acted in love towards people. Point out the ultimate revelation of God's love as revealed in Jesus. Pray, thanking God for responding to 'His enemies (us)' in love.

1 John 4:11-12: God's Love Expressed

¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

v. 11 Again, John uses a term of endearment, "Beloved..." when addressing his readers. Under the Spirit's inspiration, he may use this term to emphasize the love of the Father and Son for these for whom Christ died, or he may be expressing his own deep commitment to them. Regardless, he wants it understood that "...God set the standard of love for us. Since we are children of God, we should love other people, especially fellow believers, just as God loved us." (Holman New Testament Commentary, Vol. 11. p. 210).

B & H Publishing Group, Nashville, 1999). In 4:11, the word "... if..." could also be translated as "...since..." making the love we show for "...one another..." an evidence or indicator of our love response to God's love for us. "God's children are duty-bound to love one another." (Broadman, Vol. 12, p.217).

v. 12 "...No one has ever seen God...", yet believers love Him and know they are loved by Him. We demonstrate (and possibly even validate!) that love by the way we love others. Jesus added humanity to His holiness to show us how to love supremely; believers are called to demonstrate God's supreme love in their own lives by loving others. When we strive to love others as God has loved us in Christ, Christ's love mission to the world is "...perfected in us." In other words, "God's love is made real, tangible, [and] concrete in and through the Christian fellowship when the children of God practice love toward one another." (Broadman, *ibid*).

"In brotherly love the circle of the Father, the Son, and the people of the Son constitutes a fellowship which is not of this world. The love of God is the final reality for the life of this fellowship [the Church] and abiding in His love is the law of its life." (Kittel, G., Editor. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 1. Wm B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- One of our Four Core Values is "Committed to One Another." Twice in these six verses John has used the term "one another". How should God's love for us (personally and collectively) empower our 'one anothers'?
- Christmas is one week away. While John said "...no one has ever seen God..." we know that Bethlehem's Baby was 'God in flesh.' How should the people of God demonstrate the love of God by celebrating the coming of the Son of God?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

- God is love.
- God is the Source and Supplier of supreme love.
- God's love is perfected and demonstrated in Jesus, His Son.
- God's people are identified in how they express love for God and one another.

Next Week - Revelation 1:9-18

Revelation 1:9-18

FOCUS ATTENTION: The opening phrase, "the Revelation of Jesus Christ," serves as a summary and title for the final book of the biblical canon. John receives a vision of the risen Lord and writes an urgent and enduring message for the churches to hear and heed. Revelation summons believers to worship the one true God, to hold fast to God's trustworthy words, to resist moral compromise, spiritual complacency, and false teaching, and to wait well for the imminent coming of King Jesus.

We generally think of John as one of the inner circle of Jesus' disciples (Peter, James, and John), then as an apostle and author of his gospel account plus three letters. But in Revelation, John takes on the mantle of prophet, receiving divine instruction as to those things that are to come and setting those words down as both warning and encouragement for the church.

The ancient Greek word translated "Revelation" is *apokalupsis* (from which we get "apocalypse"). The word simply means "a revealing or unveiling." The Book of Revelation is the Revelation of Jesus Christ in the sense that it belongs to Him, He is the one doing the revealing. It is also Jesus' Revelation in the sense that He is the object revealed; Jesus is the One revealed by the book.

It is fitting, as we wrap up 2023 with the celebration of the first advent of Christ, that we near the close of The Unfolding Story in the book which points us to His second advent.

Essence of the Text

In a vision, the apostle John encounters the glorified Christ who instructs John to write the book of Revelation.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

Revelation 1:9-11: John Receives Divine Instructions

I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and

to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

(NOTE to teachers – You may find it helpful to read verses 1-8 of chapter 1 also.)

Vv. 9-10 John identifies with readers as "your brother" and "partner," rather than as an apostle. They share in three things: (1) "the tribulation," (2) "the kingdom," and (3) "the patient endurance," all of which have a common frame of reference "in Jesus." The tribulation and kingdom are end-time realities (Dan 7:27; 12:1), which Jesus inaugurated through his suffering, resurrection, and heavenly enthronement. (Tabb, Bryan, *Revelation: A Commentary*, Ch. 1) John recounts a prophetic experience, which he was careful to locate as to place and time. The place was the Isle of Patmos where John was either in exile or perhaps serving as a missionary to the prisoners there. Either way, he was there "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." The time was the Lord's Day, a Sunday, the first day of the week, the day on which Christ rose from the dead. (Michaels, J. Ramsey, *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Revelation*, pp. 58-59) "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day": To be in the Spirit seems to have more meaning than simply saying John walked "in the Spirit" as opposed to being "in the flesh" in the sense Paul meant in Galatians 5:16. The idea isn't simply that John was walking in the Spirit, but that he received a unique revelation from the Holy Spirit. This was a unique spiritual experience for John, what some might call an out of body experience – though of course, without the occult or spiritism such experiences are associated with today.

v. 11 In this setting, John hears a voice, which he compares to a trumpet's blast (cf. Exodus 19:16) which will herald the end-time woes later in the book. The voice speaks words and utters a command to write in a book to seven churches (alluded to in v. 4) now named. Why were these specific seven churches chosen? Some suggest that it was because they are arranged in a roughly circular pattern. Others think it was because these were postal districts in the Roman province of Asia. Many believe seven churches were chosen because in the Bible, the number seven often represents completeness, and these letters – and all of the Book of Revelation – are written to the complete church, not only these seven churches. In light of the symbolic importance of the number seven throughout the book of Revelation, it is likely that these seven churches were intended to represent all the churches of Asia, and perhaps all Christian congregations everywhere. (Ramsey, p. 60) Interestingly, the Apostle Paul also wrote to seven churches: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi, and Thessalonica.

At first, the source of the voice is unseen, coming from behind John. That is about to change. In the command to write lies a distinctive feature of Revelation. John will serve as a scribe who will communicate with the angels of these churches. In this context, "angels" most likely refer to human pastors as opposed to angelic beings. (Rowland, Christopher C., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XII: Hebrews-Revelation, pp. 565-566)

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- John is the last survivor of the original 12 disciples. He's now well along in years, living out his last days on the Isle of Patmos. Is God through using him?
- Are our circumstances (for good or bad) ever an excuse not to obey God?

Revelation 1:12-16: John's Vision of the Glorified Christ

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire,¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

v. 12 "I turned to see the voice:" We can only imagine what went through John's mind as he turned. The voice he heard was probably not the same sound as he remembered Jesus' voice to be (John described it as of a trumpet, Rev. 1:10). Yet he knew from the voice's self-description (Alpha and Omega, Rev. 1:8) that it was Jesus. This was John's opportunity to see Jesus again, after knowing Him so well during the years of His earthly ministry. (Guzik, Ch. 1) When John turns to "see" the awesome voice, he first sees seven golden lampstands, recalling the furnishings of Israel's tabernacle and temple and Zechariah's vision of a golden lampstand (Exodus 25:31-40; 2 Chronicles 4:7; Zechariah 4:2-6). In Rev. 1:20, Jesus explains that these lampstands represent the seven churches. (Tabb, Ch. 1) The light doesn't come from the lampstands. The light comes from the oil lamps themselves. The stands merely make the light more visible. Therefore, the lampstands are a good picture of the church. We don't produce the light; we simply display it.

Vv. 13-16 Jesus was there amid these lampstands as the Son of Man in His heavenly glory (looking back to Daniel 7:13-14). Though the title Son of Man sounds like a humble title, considering the Daniel passage, it is not a humble title at all. Jesus is walking among the lampstands, uniting the heavenly and the earthly. He holds the seven stars in His strong right hand, demonstrating both His sovereignty and their security. His physical appearance, described in a seven-fold way, is majestic, powerful, divine, and more than terrifying. But his powerful voice is comforting and reassuring. (Ashcroft, Morris, *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 12: Hebrews – Revelation, p. 261)

John then describes the awe-inspiring features of the majestic Son of Man:

- His attire—a long robe and golden sash—may have royal or priestly connotations (Isaiah 22:21; Exodus 28:4).
- White hair signifies that Christ possesses the matchless wisdom of the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9).
- Fiery eyes convey divine knowledge and insight (cf. Rev 2:18; 19:12; Daniel 10:6). Fire is also symbolic of divine judgment (cf. Matthew 5:22; 2 Peter 3:7).
- Bronze feet suggest strength, glory, and stability (cf. Rev. 2:17) and recall the heavenly man in Daniel 10:6.
- His roaring voice recalls Ezekiel 1:24 and 43:2 and expresses the awesome divine authority of Jesus's speech (cf. Rev. 1:10).
- Seven stars in his hand signify Christ's sovereign control over the leaders or representatives of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 1:11.
- The sword from his mouth alludes to Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2 and refers to Christ's words by which he judges the nations (Rev. 19:15) and false teaching in the church (Rev. 2:12, 16). The idea of it coming out of His mouth is not that Jesus carries a sword in His teeth. The idea is that this sword is His Word. His weapon – and ours also – is the Word of God (Ephesians 6:17).
- His face shining like the sun expresses Jesus's glorious divine radiance that will one day illumine the new creation (Rev. 21:23; cf. Isaiah 60:19).

Everything in this vision speaks of strength, majesty, authority, and righteousness. There is an impressive difference between this vision of Jesus and the many weak, effeminate portrayals of Jesus seen in contemporary art and media. But the Jesus that John saw is the real Jesus, the Jesus that lives and reigns in heaven today. In our

A GLORIOUS VISION OF A MAJESTIC CHRIST

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modern pictures of Jesus, we like to think of Him as He was, not Jesus as He is. We prefer to see and know Jesus after the flesh. But Paul said, Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer (2 Corinthians 5:16). We should consider the fact that this is the only physical description of Jesus given to us in the Bible. The only other description that comes close (predicting His earthly appearance) is in Isaiah 53:2: "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." (Guzik, Ch. 1)

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Our glorified Savior, Jesus, the eternal Son of God is living and active. What are some things He is doing right now for you as a believer? (interceding at the right hand of the Father, awaiting the Father's command to return.)
- Considering the power of the glorified Christ, how do these descriptions affect your faith?

Revelation 1:17-18: "Fear Not"

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last,¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Vv. 17-18 John was overwhelmed by this awesome vision, though as an apostle he knew Jesus during His earthly ministry. Even the three years John spent with the incarnate Jesus on this earth did not prepare him to see Jesus in all His heavenly glory. At this moment, John knew how miraculous it was that Jesus shielded His glory and authority while He walked this earth. Now, John is totally undone; unable to stand in the presence of the eternal Son of God.

"But He . . ." Many times, we read, "But God," throughout the Scriptures. In those moments, we see God bring comfort, peace, salvation, or hope. While the sight and sound of the glorified Christ caused John to shrink in terror, the Lord's gentle touch and kind words calmed the apostle. Perhaps the touch of Jesus felt more familiar than the appearance of Jesus. (Tabb, Ch. 1)

"Fear not . . ." is found 365 times (more or less, depending on your translation) in the Bible. John didn't need to be afraid because He was in the presence of Jesus, and Jesus clearly identifies Himself to John with three titles.

- The Son of God is the First and the Last, the God of all eternity, Lord of eternity past and eternity future, without beginning or end. He is timeless and infinite.

- The Son of God is the Living One, "I died, and behold I am alive forevermore." He has the credentials of resurrection, and lives to never die again. The victory that Jesus won over sin and death was a permanent victory. He didn't rise from the dead just to die again. We benefit from His redeeming work with assurance since He accomplished all that was required for our salvation.
- The Son of God is the One who has the keys of Death and Hades. Some imagine that the devil is somehow the "lord of Hell." Some imagine that the devil has authority or power to determine life or death. Clearly, they are wrong, for only the Son of God holds the keys of Hades and of Death. We can trust that the Lord never lets the devil borrow the keys. Better still, we can rest in the knowledge that the Son of God holds and secures the eternal future of all who trust in Him!

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- We serve a risen, glorified, Savior who actively works on our behalf. How does this truth impact your prayer life?
- How does the description of the risen, glorified Lord of the universe impact your worship?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

At its core, the book of Revelation is a book of hope. It is a written prophecy, like the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament. It is the only book of prophecy in the New Testament. Unlike the Old Testament prophecies, we read the book of Revelation as "not yet." Still, we can trust that God will accomplish all that He said He will do, just as He fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies, culminating in the first coming of Christ and the completion of His redemptive work on the cross.

- What does that mean for us?
- We can read Revelation with the same confidence as the other 65 books of the canon.
- We can have hope, knowing that God holds the future.
- We are citizens of heaven, and our true home is a place we have yet to see. Hebrews 13:14 tells us, "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."
- God has not forgotten us nor abandoned us. We are secure in Him.
- Jesus is coming again!

Next week – Revelation 21-22

Revelation 21-22

FOCUS ATTENTION: We have arrived at the end of The Unfolding Story in the final two chapters of the book of Revelation. But in this ending, we will discover a new beginning. The destruction of the final enemy, death, and the final judgment will usher in a renewal of the entire created order. A new heaven and new earth will be the perfected home in which the Lamb of God will live forever with His bride, the church. These are the people He has redeemed out of all the nations, across all the ages, by His atoning death.

Chapter 20 ends with the defeat of Satan and the Great White Throne judgment, leading to the destruction of death itself. John ends the chapter with a brief but horrifying statement about the second death, whereby all those who did not repent and believe in Jesus will be cast into the lake of fire, eternally tormented and separated from God.

Essence of the Text

Jesus will return! He has prepared for those who trust in Him a new Heaven and a new Earth. Death will be no more.

EXPLORE THE TEXT**Revelation 21:1-8: The New Heaven and the New Earth**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."⁶ And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment.⁷ The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.⁸ But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable,

as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."

Vv. 1-2 What John Saw ...

v. 1 John saw a vision of a new heaven and new earth. The idea of a new earth, with a new atmosphere and sky is a familiar theme in the Scriptures. Both Old and New Testament writers told of this new heaven and new earth. (Isaiah 65:17-18; Psalm 102:25-27; 2 Peter 3:12-13) The "new heaven" doesn't refer to the heaven where God is enthroned. "Heaven" and "sky" are the same words in Greek. (Guzik, David, Revelation, Ch. 21) John's point is that the earth and sky that disappeared in Revelation 20:11 are now replaced with a new sky and a new earth ... a new world and a new environment for the people of God. Scholars differ as to whether the new earth is entirely new (newly created) or it is the old earth transformed (resurrected) as will all believers when they receive glorified bodies. Either way, the new earth will be free from the curse – no more death, no disease, no evil, no suffering, and no sorrow.

"... and the sea was no more." The sea is associated with death and the evil activity and authority of the dragon, beast, and Babylon (Revelation 12:12, 17; 13:1; 18:17, 19). The sea's absence in the renewed creation signals the removal of every threat and adversary for God's redeemed people. (Tabb, Brian, Revelation: A Commentary, Ch. 21) That is not to say that there will be no bodies of water on the new earth. The use of "sea" is highly symbolic throughout the Scriptures – mystery, separation, and the grave.

v. 2 The new earth will not be complete without the new city – a holy Jerusalem, built not with human hands, but created and prepared especially for the bride of Christ – the redeemed church. The earthly Jerusalem had a long tradition and was central to the early worship of God's people; but Jerusalem stoned the prophets and crucified Christ. (Ashcraft, Morris, The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 12, Hebrews-Revelation, p. 353)

Vv. 3-8 What John Heard ...

John hears a voice from the throne, which explains what he sees in 21:1-2. God's presence (dwelling place) with redeemed humanity will bring about ultimate fulfillment of the covenant relationship. All the things that resulted from the fall – especially death – will be no more. Therefore, there will no longer be sorrow, sadness, or pain of any kind. The Lord will bring comfort and do away with all evil.

In the present age, followers of Jesus are "new creations" in the spiritual sense (2 Corinthians 5:17). Yet we still struggle with sin as we battle temptation from our carnal nature. In

the age to come, all things will be made new and perfect forever, no longer stained with sin and death.

Vv. 5-6 God Almighty now speaks from his throne. "I am making all things new" recalls God's promise in Isaiah 43:19 and expresses the comprehensive scope of God's work in Revelation 21:1-2, which uses the word "new" three times. For the twelfth time in the book, John is told to write what he sees and hears. Coming from the Lord, the words are assuredly "trustworthy and true." As "the Alpha and the Omega," the sovereign God created and sustains everything in the beginning and brings history to its appointed end (cf. Revelation 1:8). God promises to satisfy his thirsty people fully and freely in the new creation. (Tabb, Ch. 21)

Vv. 7-8 The Lord contrasts the glorious inheritance for victorious saints with the eternal punishment of unbelievers. The covenantal language is now expressed as a Father-son relationship. Those who overcome (by faith in Jesus, as in 1 John 5:5) enjoy a special relationship with God. Those who reject Jesus and make themselves apostate are specifically prohibited from entering the New Jerusalem. Their fate is eternal separation from God and consignment to the eternal lake of fire.

DISCUSSION PROMPT

- Paul contrasted earthly problems with the hope of future glory: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." 2 Corinthians 4:17-18. Do you find the promise of a future hope comforting or frustrating?

Revelation 21:9-12, 22-27: The New Jerusalem

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,¹¹ having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.¹² It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed.

²² And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.²⁴ By its light will

the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it,²⁵ and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there.²⁶ They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.
²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

Vv. 9-12 This heavenly city is literal, but it is called the bride, the Lamb's wife because it is the place where all God's people are gathered. In this sense the New Jerusalem is certainly like the bride; but this association doesn't diminish the reality behind the image. The city is associated with the bride to awe us with a sense of its beauty and grandeur.

Some believe this passage provides a literal description of the New Jerusalem; others view it as a complex symbol for the life and provision of the Lamb for His redeemed people. The angel shows John the holy city and then measures it (vv. 15-21). The mountain to which John is taken "in the Spirit" (part of his vision) is more than a vantage point for the angel to point out features of the New Jerusalem. This is Mount Zion on which the holy city stands, or rather where it will land as it descends from heaven. (Michaels, J. Ramsey, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Revelation, p. 241) Throughout Scripture, mountains have represented places of worship and are associated with the heavens or the presence of God.

John's first impression upon seeing the New Jerusalem was that it was gloriously and radiantly beautiful. "Glory of God" suggests brilliant light. He compares it to jasper, normally a dull stone, but here it is described as "clear as crystal." Following his initial amazement, John begins to describe the city itself, beginning with the walls. He appears to be following Ezekiel (48:30-35) who described a city named, "The Lord is There." The city Ezekiel described had four high walls and three gates on each side which were named for the 12 tribes of Israel, like the New Jerusalem. This city in Revelation has 12 angels who serve as watchmen at each gate. Time does not allow us to delve deeply into the details found in vv. 15-21, but there we learn that the holy city is massive! Each dimension was measured at 1,500 miles. This is the same distance from Maine to Florida; the square footage would approximate the size of the moon! The building materials are described in terms of precious jewels. John appears to mean the city defies description; its beauty and glory are beyond our ability to comprehend. (Ashcraft, p. 355)

Vv. 22-27 Verse 22 is notable for what John does not see. There is no temple, nor is there a need for a temple. God's presence makes it unnecessary. There is no sun or moon, for God's glory is more than sufficient; He is the light and

lamp. Nations will walk according to this divine light, fulfilling Isaiah 60:3. Moreover, while the earth's rulers formerly fought against the Lamb (Rev 19:19), John depicts kings bringing their glory and honor into the city of God (21:24, 26), alluding to Isaiah 60:3, 5, 11. While closed gates offer protection from enemies, the new Jerusalem's gates are always open to express the complete security and welcome of the redeemed nations, fulfilling Isaiah 60:11. The city is holy and pure, so nothing unclean, detestable, or false may enter, only those chosen for life and redeemed by Christ's blood may reside in God's presence forever (Rev 21:27; 22:14–15). (Michaels, p. 245)

DISCUSSION PROMPT

- Ask a class member to read John 14:1–3. Discuss how the words of Jesus in John's gospel are fulfilled in this passage in Revelation.

Revelation 22: 1-4, 12-21: Jesus is Coming

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.³ No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

Vv. 1-4 The glorious new creation is described in which God dwells with His people and brings complete healing, salvation, and restoration (cf. 21:3–5). This passage includes many parallels to Genesis 2–3 and fulfills OT prophecies such as Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14. This new creation paradise does not simply replicate the Garden of Eden but surpasses it. The tree of life and river of life provide food and drink for God's multi-ethnic people, who worship and reign as priest-kings forever. (Tabb, Ch. 22)

The Almighty's throne is the center of the new creation. Jesus conquered and sat down on his Father's throne (Revelation 3:21), so the book's concluding vision identifies God and the Lamb as joint occupants of the divine throne (Revelation 22:1, 3). The throne is the source of the water of life, recalling the river flowing from Eden. The tree of life features prominently in the original creation (Genesis 2:9) and the new creation (Revelation 22:2), framing the entire biblical story. God restricted access to the tree of life after the fall (Genesis 3:22, 24), but Christ promises that His victorious people will eat its fruits (Revelation 2:7; 22:14).

With all enemies defeated and sin, the curse, and death eradicated, God and the Lamb reign over their renewed creation for their people's everlasting enjoyment. There is no longer any curse, recalling earlier statements about the "former things" that are "no more" in Revelation 21:1, 4.

The redeemed servants of God worship and reign forever, fulfilling the creation mandate in Genesis 1:26–28 and their vocation as priest-kings. Amazingly, the saints will behold God's face (v. 4), enjoying a new level of knowledge and access to God previously unavailable. Moses was permitted to see only God's back, not his face. John's Gospel declares that while no one has ever seen God, Christ made him known, and his followers saw his divine glory (John 1:14, 18). In the new creation, believers behold God's face and are transformed. The saints also bear God's name on their foreheads, expressing their identity as priests. Israel's high priest wore a plate with the words "Holy to Yahweh" on his forehead (Exodus 28:36–38) (Tabb, Ch. 22)

¹² "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done.

¹³ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." ¹⁴ Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

¹⁵ Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. ¹⁶ "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." ¹⁷ The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price. ¹⁸ I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book,¹⁹ and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. ²⁰ He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.

Vv. 12-21 The book's final section urges readers to worship God and heed this prophecy to receive blessing rather than judgment. Christ is the primary speaker in this section. His message is always to be ready! (Matthew 24:44) As an added incentive for us to do and be what is right, being ready for Jesus' return, He reminds us just who He is. Christ uses three divine titles in v.13—Alpha and Omega, first and last, beginning and end—to stress that He is the

sovereign Lord who brings God's purposes to their appointed end.

"Blessed are those who wash their robes" is the book's seventh and final beatitude. The redeemed have access to the tree of life and enter the new Jerusalem, while all others are excluded from the city of God, including "the dogs" (referring either to false teachers or cult prostitutes) and all who love and practice lies. (Tabb, Ch. 22)

v. 16 Christ further identifies himself as "the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star," recalling and explaining messianic titles used earlier in the book. In v. 17, the threefold "come" is likely modeled on Isaiah 55:1, summoning the thirsty to receive and delight in the "free gift" of eternal life. The Spirit speaks directly, as does the Bride. Here, the Bride signifies the corporate people of God in their future purity and joy. Thus, the divine Spirit and the glorified church together beckon present readers to "come" that they may receive Christ's promises and share in the Bride's inheritance.

Vv. 18-19 Christ warns against adding to or taking away from the words of this book. Scholars have interpreted these verses in three primary ways: (1) a prohibition against corrupting the text of this book; (2) a restriction on all further prophetic activity; and (3) a warning not to falsify this book's message through errant teaching or actions. The third view is most likely. (Guzik, Ch. 22)

v. 20 "Surely I am coming soon" reiterates Christ's promise in 22:7, 12. Christ's return is the church's "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13) and is a central theme of Revelation. The expectation of Christ's coming as "King of kings" to judge His foes, save His people, and restore all things should move believers to echo John's prayer "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

v. 21 The book (and the Bible) ends with a word of benediction. The last verse of the Old Testament contains a curse: Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse (Malachi 4:6). Fittingly, the last words of the New Testament speak of grace, because grace describes God's dealing with man based on the New Covenant. Amen!

DISCUSSION PROMPT

- Do you look forward to the Lord's return?
Why or why not?

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

Throughout the book of Revelation, John has used vivid imagery to describe the indescribable. As we read this important, last book of the canon of Scripture, it's important not to miss the forest for the trees. John knew that human language was incapable of expressing, (just as our imagination is incapable of perceiving) the reality of the things in the spiritual realm and eternity. Let's take care when reading through this book (which I encourage you to do), not to get bogged down in (or scared off by) minute details and miss the epic grandeur of what is to come and the marvelous hope that is secured for every follower of Christ. It bears repeating that Revelation is a book of hope!

- If you have repented of your sin and trusted in Jesus' atoning work through His death on the cross and resurrection, you share in this amazing hope!
- If you are unsure as to whether you have this hope, do not delay in seeking out another believer or pastor. Settle the matter of your faith and security in Christ TODAY!

Additional Resources:

The ESV Study Bible, Crossway Bibles, Wheaton, Illinois

The MacArthur Study Bible (NKJV), Word Bibles, Nashville, Tennessee

Unger's Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, Illinois

Boring, Eugene M., Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Revelation, Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky

Wilcock, Michael, The Message of Revelation, InterVarsity Press, Downer's Grove, Illinois