



Behind the Curtain

SECRETS OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

SERIES COMPANION

INTRODUCTION

Do you ever wonder what goes on behind the scenes, if the hype matches reality, or if it's all just smoke and mirrors? In Revelation we get a peek behind the curtain and at the spiritual health of seven New Testament churches. Jesus gives his direct and honest feedback. Some of the Churches are healthy and thriving - they are doing a great job of loving their neighbors as themselves. Other churches, however... well not so much. If Jesus were to look behind the curtain of our Church, our families, and our lives, what kind of things might he want to say to us? Are there secrets we'd rather not have come to light? The good news is that when Jesus shines a light on the broken parts of our lives he does so not to shame us or condemn us, but to encourage us to be well!

We hope you join us this fall as we explore the secrets of the seven churches of Revelation together and learn how we can grow in love for God and each other!

RESOURCE OVERVIEW

Here we provide space to take notes on the sermon and Scripture text and answer reflection questions that you can discuss with others. When considering the reflection questions, remember that the goal is not to have all the "right" answers—instead, let these questions serve as a starting point for curiosity in your conversation with God and others. See the Appendix of this guide for more resources and opportunities to engage with this study.

Please note this discussion guide is created before the series begins. Discussion questions are prepared before the sermons are written and based on the theme and text for the week. Thank you for your understanding that the topic and focus of the sermon as the pastor writes it may differ from what is written in the discussion questions.

APPENDIX (page 15)

Offers a deeper dive into the topic as well as resources for Bible study, leading small groups, and links for further support.

- Additional Resources
- Online Bibles
- Prayer Tools
- "Icebreaker" Questions
- Tips for Guiding Conversations
- General Resources for Individual Support

SERMON SCHEDULE & SCRIPTURE READING

**Subject to change at the discretion of the pastors.*

While there's not a book that accompanies this sermon series, you might enjoy Scot McKnight and Cody Matchett's new commentary on the book of Revelation, [Revelation for the Rest of Us: A Prophetic Call to Follow Jesus for the Dissident Disciple](#).

Sermon	Topic & Scripture Passage
Week 1	Ephesus: Revelation 2:1-7
*Week 2/3	Smyrna: Revelation 2:8-11

*Week 2/3	Pergamum: Revelation 2:12-17
*Week 4/5	Thyatira: Revelation 2:18-19
*Week 4/5	Sardis: Revelation 3:1-6
Week 6	Philadelphia: Revelation 3:7-13
Week 7	Laodicea: Revelation 3:14-22

*For weeks 2 and 3 as well as for weeks 4 and 5 use the passage/Revelation church covered in the sermon from your Highrock congregation on Sunday. The other passage/Revelation church will be covered in the following week.

WEEKLY FORMAT

SERMON DISCUSSION

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT: Listen to the sermon, read weekly selections/view video links (if provided), read scripture passages, and answer reflection questions. (30-40 mins)

RELATE: Discuss reflection questions with your small group. (50 mins)

PRAY: Use the suggested prayer prompt to conclude your time (5-10 mins)

CONVERSATION COVENANT

We hope all small group discussions are lively and enriching, but sometimes tough topics will be discussed. The Conversation Covenant* is an agreement to hold respect and grace toward all participants within a small group, no matter the conversation. Please adhere to the Conversation Covenant or consider creating one that fits your context.

*Adapted from <https://conversational-leadership.net/conversation-covenant/>

I pledge:

To act in good faith, with curiosity. I will assume the best about my conversation partners when entering into our groups. I will give the benefit of the doubt, recognizing that they may know something I don't.

To show respect. I will show respect. I will be polite and give due regard to the feelings and traditions of others. I understand that I do not have to agree with someone to show them respect.

To speak the truth. I won't use rhetorical tricks to try to win an argument. I will speak what I genuinely believe is the nuanced truth.

To aim to discover the truth. I will not enter into a conversation with the purpose of changing the mind of anyone to my way of thinking.

To focus on what we can change. I will focus on what we can do differently in the future since we cannot change what we did in the past.

To take responsibility for the conversation. I will take responsibility for the quality of the conversation and the abidance of the rules both in principle and in spirit.

To follow the covenant even when others fail to do so. I will abide by the rules regardless of whether another person breaks them.

To respect the confidentiality of the group. I will not share the stories of group members verbally or in written form (including on social media and online outlets).

To lighten up and approach the conversation in good humor. I recognize that humor is a hallmark of a constructive, generative conversation and take the conversation in good humor.

PREPARE

The following questions are jumping-off points for personal reflection. Engage with them to awaken your awareness of themes in this sermon series. Pay attention to the questions that stand out to you and look back on them throughout the series to see how God might be speaking to you.

CONSIDER

- The book of Revelation can bring up different kinds of images and impressions for many of us. If anything, what is your experience with this book? What's one question you have about this book? What's something you're curious to learn more about?
- This sermon series looks at topics like honesty, transparency, and how to be a community with a new identity in Christ in light of powerful forces in our world. What's something about these topics you're excited about? What's something that could be challenging about them for you?
- As you enter into these discussions, how would you describe your spiritual life? Is there something you believe God is asking of you? List this (or these) below:

WEEK 1: Ephesus

Revelation 2:1–7

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 2:1–7

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon or reading has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. What virtues or gifts does Jesus identify in the church at Ephesus? Consider your own context. Where do you see these gifts yourself (in other individuals or the church) and how do they help contribute to community?
3. The church at Ephesus is admonished for forsaking “the love you had at first” (2:4). What are some important things that have helped ground and sustain your faith in the past? Keep your response/s to this question in mind for question 4.
4. How might a return to or renewed focus on some of these basic practices help motivate you to draw closer to God? With the goal of drawing closer to God, what’s one practical step you can take this week?

PRAY | Give thanks for God’s steadfast love for us in Jesus. Pray that you might be more aware of God’s presence. Ask God for the strength to be faithful and to love God more this week, whether this happens to come easily or is challenging.

Revelation 2:1-7

1 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

* WEEK 2/3: Smyrna

Revelation 2:8–11

* For whether to use this week's discussion guide (Smyrna: Revelation 2:8–11) or the guide on page 9 (Pergamum: Revelation 2:12–17), consult which Scripture passage/Revelation church was covered in the sermon at your Highrock congregation this past Sunday. The other passage/Revelation church will be covered in the following week.

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 2:8–11

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. How did the sermon help shed light on some of the harder-to-understand words or phrases in this passage, like “synagogue of Satan” (2:9), “ten days” of suffering (2:10), “victor’s crown” (2:10), or “second death” (2:11)?
3. Smyrna is the only Revelation church that receives only praise and no criticism. Looking at how the Smyrna church is described by Jesus in this passage and drawing from the sermon, why do you think this might be significant? What can it teach us?
4. How do Jesus' words to the church Smyrna offer an unexpected or even potentially subversive idea of what a meaningful, rich life looks like in relationship to God?
5. What from the sermon and Bible passage gives you hope in what God can do - at a personal level, communally, or in society? How might you apply this to a particular situation this week or a specific challenge you're currently facing?

PRAY | Pray for God to assist you and those in your discussion group to face the different obstacles in your life with grace, love, and wisdom.

Revelation 2:8-11

8 “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. 9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.

11 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

*WEEK 2/3: Pergamum

Revelation 2:12–17

* For whether to use this week's discussion guide (Pergamum: Revelation 2:12–17) or the guide on page 8 (Smyrna, Revelation 2:8–11), consult which Scripture passage/Revelation church was covered in the sermon at your Highrock congregation this past Sunday. The other passage/Revelation church will be covered in the following week.

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 2:12–17

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon or reading has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. How did the sermon help clarify some of the context (people, places, objects) of this passage, like "Antipas" (2:13), "throne" of Satan (2:13), "Balaam" and "Balak" (2:14), the "Nicolatians" (2:15), or the "white stone" (2:17)?
3. The people of Pergamum were surrounded by temptations to unfaithfulness that took different forms: political, economic, and religious. Discuss some possible parallels in our contexts today. Bring your responses to this question into the next one.
4. How do these connections help you see new ways of applying discipleship to your life? What could a practical step towards greater faithfulness in one of these areas look like for you?
5. Drawing from this passage and the sermon, how do you see God's grace as part of our call to be faithful? Where do you see God's grace in your own life right now?

PRAY | Take a moment in silence before God, confessing how we are prone to give into the powers of sin in our lives and in the world. Give thanks for God's grace, and ask for the Spirit to encourage your spirit, and the spirit of others in your group, towards greater faithfulness – step-by-step.

Revelation 2:12-17

12 To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13 I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

14 Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15 Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

*WEEK 4/5: Thyatira

Revelation 2:18–29

* For whether to use this week's discussion guide (Thyatira: Revelation 2:18–29) or the guide on page 12 (Sardis: Revelation 3:1–6), consult which Scripture passage/Revelation church was covered in the sermon at your Highrock congregation this past Sunday. The other passage/Revelation church will be covered in the following week.

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 2:18–29

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon or reading has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. How did the sermon help clarify references in this passage, like “Jezebel” (2:20) or “the morning star” (2:28)?
3. Drawing from this sermon and the passage as a whole, verses 18–29, how can this Scripture help you understand how faith includes both acceptance (from God) *and* the call to grow? How can our faith lives include both?
4. Discuss how the sermon addressed sexuality and morality, or how our sexuality connects to our relationship with God.
5. What do you think we need to have better conversations about faith, sexuality, and how we honor and can use our bodies to love God more?
6. What do you sense as God's word to you from this sermon or passage? How can you apply this to your life this week?

PRAY | Ask God to give you the grace and discipline in your mind, body, and heart to love God more fully this week. Pray this also for your faith community.

Revelation 2:18–29

18 “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. 19 I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

20 Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. 22 So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. 23 I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

24 Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, 25 except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

26 To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— 27 that one 'will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery'—just as I have received authority from my Father. 28 I will also give that one the morning star. 29 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

*WEEK 4/5: Sardis

Revelation 3:1–6

* For whether to use this week's discussion guide (Sardis: Revelation 3:1–6) or the guide on page 10 (Thyatira: Revelation 2:18–29), consult which Scripture passage/Revelation church was covered in the sermon at your Highrock congregation this past Sunday. The other passage/Revelation church will be covered in the following week.

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 3:1–6

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon or reading has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. Begin with a brief spiritual inventory: Where does your faith or relationship with God feel healthy and strong at the moment? What is lacking or feels incomplete? Keep your responses in mind for the following question.
3. Have a volunteer from your group read Revelation 3:2. "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God." Use these questions:

First, what might we learn from the fact that God gives us time to grow, to bring what has been started to completion? What thoughts or feelings does this bring up for you?

Second, what kind of spiritual efforts or commitments have been started in your life to which God might be calling you to return?
4. Consider people, specific practices, or periods in your life where you have found encouragement to grow spiritually. Are there ways these might offer you new encouragement today?

PRAY | Give thanks to God who remains with us, whose Spirit encourages our spirit to be faithful. Ask God to help bring spiritual renewal to a needed area of your life. Pray for the transformative presence of the Spirit in your faith community.

Revelation 3:1-6

1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. 3 Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. 5 The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. 6 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

WEEK 6: Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7–13

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 3:7–13

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon or reading has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. How did the sermon help clarify some of the references in this passage, like the “synagogue of Satan” (3:9), the “hour of trial” (3:10), or the “new Jerusalem” (3:12)?
3. Jesus affirms the Philadelphia Christians in their weaknesses (3:8). How might being more open with others about our weaknesses and areas of dependency on God be both challenging and rewarding? What do you think wisdom – sharing with caution, wisdom, and courage – could look like for you here?
4. What does the promise of God’s provision in this passage say to you about God right now? How can it help you pray for those who are suffering, and/or how might you hear this passage on a personal level?
5. Broader (sermon series) reflections: What are you learning from this sermon series? How do you feel like you’re being challenged in a way that’s helping you grow spiritually and in your faith community?

PRAY | Give thanks for the gifts that God freely gives to us, both those that we see and recognize and the many that go unnoticed. God is gracious. Pray that we may be open to the unexpected work of God in our lives.

Revelation 3:7-13

7 “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 8 I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 10 Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

11 I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. 12 The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. 13 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

WEEK 7: Laodicea

Revelation 3:14–22

(PRE-WORK) REFLECT | Before your small group gathering, complete the following and reflect on the discussion questions. These will be the basis for your small group time.

- Listen to the Sermon on Highrock's [YouTube channel](#) and note any reactions you had – curiosities, concerns, or delights
- Read Revelation 3:14–22

RELATE | Use these questions as a launching point for your small group conversation or personal reflection.

1. What from the sermon or reading has brought up new questions or interesting points you would like to discuss?
2. How did the sermon shed light on the meaning of the “lukewarm” deeds Jesus describes in Revelation 3:15–16? What is Jesus asking of his followers?
3. Reflecting on the sermon and reading, what are some of the more *subtle* ways that material resources can draw us away from God and love of neighbor? How does this passage speak to a more abundant life in relationship with God?
4. How has this sermon – and this series as a whole – helped you better understand how God disciplines us in love, or calls us to certain challenges with our good in view? Bring your responses to this question to the following one.
5. As we close out this series, how are you being called to lean into a challenge of discipleship? As willing, try to identify and share one way this applies to you personally and another way that is more communally directed.

PRAY | Thank God for never giving up on us, always being faithful. Ask God for strength to be faithful and to enjoy living in ongoing relationship with God and those who encourage us in our faith.

Revelation 3:14-22

14 “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

21 To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

APPENDIX

Below are resources to look into if you are interested in diving deeper into some of the topics covered in this series. If you need resources that more specifically address your own experience, demographic, or faith journey, please reach out to a Highrock pastor or to smallgroups@highrock.org and we will be happy to help!

ONLINE BIBLES

- [Blue Letter Bible](#)
- [Bible Gateway](#)

PRAYER TOOLS

- [The Prayer of Examen: Tracking Our Moods](#)
- [Breath Prayer/Prayer of the Heart](#)
- [Divine/Fixed Hour Prayer](#)
- [SoulCare guide to Imaginative Prayer Spiritual Practice](#)
- [Imaginative Prayer/Ignatian Contemplation](#)
- [SoulCare guide to Recall & Paraphrase Spiritual Practice](#)
- [Lament](#)
- [Laughter and Prayer](#)
- [Palms Up, Palms Down](#)
- [Pray a Psalm in a Nature Setting](#)
- [Praying with your Body](#)
- [Welcoming Prayer](#)

“ICEBREAKER” QUESTIONS

- What was a small win from your week?
- Share a High/Low from your day or week.
- On a scale of 1-10, how are you doing coming into this meeting?
- If you were to describe yourself as a weather forecast today, what would you be? Example: sunny, partly cloudy, rainy with a chance of snow, etc.
- What song would be the theme track for the day you had?

GENERAL RESOURCES FOR INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

- [Spiritual Practices](#)
- [Mental Health Resources](#)
- [Parenting & Kids—Understanding each other through Milestones](#)

TIPS FOR GUIDING CONVERSATION

- Allow everyone space to share. It's ok to ask what people are thinking even if they don't volunteer to share right away. But always give people the option to decline to share. Example: "Hey, Fred, you've been a little quiet and I'm curious to know what you think. Would you like to share anything?"
- Remember there aren't necessarily "right" answers. Encourage participants to simply be curious about what came up for them or others without the pressure of feeling like they "should" have thought or felt anything in particular. Example: Instead of asking "What is this story supposed to be communicating?" ask "What did you notice?"
- Embrace the differences. Affirm that different people can come to different conclusions regarding the same thing. Example: "Interestingly, the text reminded Susie of ABC, while it reminded José of XYZ. Both can be present and true."
- Adapt to suit your group's needs. Sometimes conversation is free-flowing and sometimes it's easier to move through discussion questions one at a time. Do what feels suitable for your group, but don't feel pressured to answer/discuss every single question.

- Encourage curiosity by modeling curiosity. Asking someone “Tell me more about XYZ” can be a really simple but effective tool to go deeper in conversation.
- Don't be afraid of silence. It's natural to want to fill silences or pauses in a conversation. But don't be afraid to sit in silence with your group members. Sometimes thoughts just need time to percolate, so don't feel like you have to rush to another question if no one shares immediately.
- Refer back to the Conversation Covenant. This is the posture that we as Highrock hold as we gather in groups. When the conversation gets tough, you can always refer back to the Conversation Covenant to remind the group that everyone has agreed to abide by this covenant in small group meetings.