

VIDEO-BASED
9-SESSION BIBLE STUDY

LETTERS OF HOPE FROM REVELATION

we over me

Whitney Capps

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**we
over
me**

Whitney Capps

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Whitney Capps is a national speaker for Proverbs 31 Ministries and a writer for the free Bible app, First 5, reaching more than one million people daily. As a Bible study geek, Whitney's delight is to dig into God's Word for profound, yet practical, truth. A communicator at heart, Whitney comes alive sharing those truths with any gal who will give her even a few minutes. Before her writing and speaking gig, Whitney served as a talent acquisitions professional for the corporate office of Chick-fil-A. Additionally, Whitney served her community as her local Bible Study Fellowship teaching leader for several years. Whitney has also written a book entitled *Sick of Me: From Transparency to Transformation*.

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To hear more from Whitney, visit her website WhitneyCapps.com.

INTRODUCTION

If I had to sum up my relationship with the church, I'd say, "It's complicated."

My Dad is a pastor, so I've grown up with the church. I feel like I've seen it all. I've seen people selflessly loving others, choosing *we* over *me* for the glory of Jesus and the good of the gospel. I've also seen the exact opposite. I've not only seen it. I've lived it. I've been guilty of it.

Let's face it. Church is just plain hard. Too often we overcommit and under deliver. We like the idea of the church, but not the practical demands of how that idea becomes reality. We love the notion of community, but when community comes close and steps on our toes, well that's a different story.

On my best days, I've asked God to help me feel a deep love for the church even, and especially, when I don't. On my worst days, I've wondered if this was truly God's best idea. Unfortunately, over the last few years, I've had more bad days than good ones. And I'm not proud of it. I wanted out. I wasn't planning to bail on Jesus. I was sure that I could love Jesus but not love the church. So I went to Scripture to try and learn exactly how Jesus Himself felt about the church. After all, so much of the New Testament records Jesus rebuking the religious. Surely He would understand my frustration.

As it turns out, Scripture proves the exact opposite. Jesus is madly in love with the church. His love isn't some romantic whitewashing. He sees her for what she is, and yet, Jesus isn't content to leave her that way. His final words to the church are recorded in Revelation, and they are filled with hope, blessing, conviction, and promise.

Studying these letters changed me. I realized Jesus would never be OK for me to love Him but hate on the church. She is the one He died for, and she is the one He's returning for. We are the ones called to care for the church, His bride, as we wait in the vestibule of human history for the grandest wedding celebration of all time to begin.

I pray Christ uses this study to refresh your heart for Him and His church as He did mine. I pray we will all continually remind ourselves that the Christian community called the church was meant to be people committed to *we* not *me*.



SESSION ONE

The Church— What's Up?

DISCUSS

Can you understand Whitney's frustration with the church? Explain.

How can frustration with the church affect your personal, spiritual life?

How can one person's frustration with the church impact the effectiveness of that church as a whole?

What do you think the title *We Over Me* means?

Are you ever guilty of choosing *me* over *we* when it comes to church? Explain.

What do you hope to get out of this study?

What is your hope for the church in general? Your hope for your church specifically?

WEDDING DAY PREP

I'm a church girl. My dad has been and still is my pastor, so I've grown up in the church. I can honestly say that I am wildly, madly, and deeply in love with the church, the Bride of Christ. She is beautiful and beloved (Rev. 21:2). Her (our) husband is God Himself. Our wedding and reception, called the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, will be the most perfect, extravagant party you can imagine (Rev. 19:6-10).

While all that is theologically true, that's the Instagram® version of the church—all baptisms, Christmas plays, and silhouetted hands lifted in powerful worship. Those posts garner a multitude of likes—the Bride in her wedding day best.

But too often I see the straight out of bed, wearing yesterday's makeup, running into Wal-Mart® version of the church—equally true, not equally Instagrammable.

That's the church I know. She is real, raw, and far from perfect. But despite her imperfections, I'm kind of viciously protective of the church. If you think that's because I haven't been hurt by the church, friend, you'd be dead wrong. It's been a strained relationship from time to time to be sure.

Despite it all, I love her still. She is to me both lovely, full of wedding day potential, and ordinary—broken and desperate to be better than she is. I'm not trying to expose all the church's dirty little secrets or most unflattering angles, but we must talk about the less than polished places. Our generation needs to be honest about the wearied and harried side of church life and yet ever committed to our collective wedding day readiness.

That's on you and me individually. We can't lay that responsibility on those "professional" Christians who staff and serve our churches—you know, the ones on the payroll, the seminarians, the game day players who take the field.

Wouldn't that be nice? But my dad and the hundreds of thousands of other ministers will not be the only ones judged for how well Jesus is represented to the world. That's on you and me too.

As most brides do, I had hopes, expectations, and maybe delusions that my wedding day would be perfect. For me, it almost was. Almost.

On a steamy Saturday in May 2001, my bridesmaids and I drove up to a sweet, little salon, the salon I've been using since my childhood. We packed it out, all eleven of us, buzzing around getting primped and polished. Hours later, we made the short drive across town, singing, laughing, reminiscing, and fine-tuning our schedule to make sure we would have everything ready by ceremony time. We went to the makeshift bridal suite at the church and started getting ready.

A little later, one of my bridesmaids came in and emphatically said, "Whit, you need to get to the sanctuary now. There's a massive storm headed our way, and if we don't get you into the sanctuary now, you may have to walk in the rain."

You see, the bridal suite was in a building separate from the sanctuary—to walk down the aisle, I first had to walk outside. We gathered up all our stuff and quickly made our way to the other building beneath ominous, dark clouds.

We piled into the foyer but quickly realized that it wouldn't do for the bride to be standing there greeting all the guests when they arrived. The only option we had was to file into the ladies' restroom. It was like a bad joke—how do you fit a bride and ten bridesmaids into a bathroom the size of a Volkswagen®? As it turns out, not easily.

I spent my last hour of single life stuffed into a church bathroom. Each time the door opened, the faces of the women needing to "go" were priceless. None of them expected to come face-to-face with the bride. We couldn't help but laugh. Through it all though, my bridesmaids, my best friends dressed in sea-foam green (*bless!*), were so kind, faithful, funny, and selfless. Missy, my college roommate, had me laughing and distracted the entire time. Meredith, my soon-to-be sister-in-law, kept refilling my water. Lori and Ashley were loyal lookouts, reporting back to me on guest arrivals. And Sharon made sure my hair stayed perfect and reapplied my lipstick.

It's one of the sweetest memories of my wedding day. Each of my friends, making sure in her own way that I was wedding day ready—the most beautiful version of me I could be. Despite cruddy circumstances and less than ideal last minutes, when those doors opened, I was ready for my groom.

The church, the global, eternal collection of God's people, is Christ's Bride. And the wedding day is fast approaching. Despite the gathering clouds of external opposition and internal grumbling, all who are made alive in Christ—single, married, divorced, or widowed—need to be doing our part to make her wedding day ready.

DAY ONE

WHAT GOD THINKS OF HIS PEOPLE

Scripture often defines the congregation of God's people and God's relationship with them in marriage terms, such as bride, bridegroom, husband, and wife. Search in your concordance or favorite online Bible resource for these words. List several of the references and phrases that you find in the chart below. I've provided one to get you started.

REFERENCE	PHRASE
Isaiah 54:5	Indeed, your husband is your Maker.

Now go back and circle the references that specifically use the word *bride* to designate the people of God. (Keep in mind that when the "new Jerusalem" is mentioned in Revelation, the writer was not simply talking about a physical location, but he also meant the people of God, His church.¹)

While these marriage and relationship passages may not always present her in the most favorable or praiseworthy ways, what do you notice about the Bride and God's love for her?

In the New Testament, how is the Bride described? What do we have to look forward to?

Did you notice that Jesus and the writers of the New Testament talk a lot about the bridegroom? Why do you think that is? What does that tell us?

Scripture reminds us over and over that God's union with His people is a relationship of delight, not duty. From the beginning, God sets His affections on His people—from Adam and Eve, to the patriarchs, to Israel, and now on to us. This is not an arranged marriage. There is no compulsion, manipulation, or “fixing up” to bring us together. God chooses us. Even where marriage terms or the analogy of a bride are not used, God's love for His people is evident throughout all of Scripture.

I love the story of Moses. He is one of my favorite individuals in Scripture. When God found Moses in the desert of Midian and spoke to him from the burning bush, God used a phrase that would become a defining and repeated title for Israel.

Read Exodus 3:7 and 3:10. What possessive description is in both verses?

This promising description became a rallying cry and anchored God's demand to Pharaoh, made through Moses—“Let *my people* go” (Ex. 5:1, *emphasis mine*). Though they were Pharaoh's slaves, the Israelites belonged to God. They were His people. Pharaoh had no jurisdiction over them, and plague after plague would give evidence to that fact.

Our belonging to God isn't merely transactional; it is relational. God loves His people dearly. His faithfulness to Israel during their Egyptian slavery and freeing them from said slavery proved His love. Just in case the grumbling Israelites were to lose sight of His affection (as was often the case) God said something tender and yet profound at the end of Deuteronomy. They were His possession, and possession has privileges.

Read Deuteronomy 26:18-19. What did God promise to the nation of Israel?

What does God promise to His people today? Read the following passages, and note the promises given. This list is not even remotely exhaustive, so feel free to add other promises God has made to His people.

SCRIPTURE	PROMISES
Acts 1:8	
Romans 8:1	
Ephesians 3:20-21	
Philippians 1:6	
Philippians 4:19	
Hebrews 4:16	
2 Peter 1:3-4	

When we combine an understanding of God’s possession of His people with His anger over their unfaithfulness (Jer. 2–5; Ezek. 16), our view of God’s love for His Bride may become skewed. This may especially be true if you have ever been in a controlling, manipulative, or abusive relationship. You may shudder or bristle at these descriptions. Friend, first let me say, I’m so, so sorry for your pain and trauma. It is real, and I don’t want to minimize it.

But I also don’t want you to miss how deeply God loves you because someone may have poisoned your perspective of this kind of possessive love. God’s possession of Israel was always intended to be protective—for Israel’s good and God’s glory. Israel’s success was a poignant picture of God’s character, provision, and protection. His love would make Israel flourish!

When we consider God’s jealous love for Israel, it’s helpful to see it in terms of God being jealous for Himself. God is not insecure. He is perfectly satisfied within the triune joy of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God didn’t

choose Israel to satisfy an unmet personal need. He chose Israel so that He could satisfy the peoples' unmet needs in Him. When God is grieved by our idolatry or faithlessness, it is because the Bride is choosing a love that is less than the perfect, protective, promise-filled love God intends. His jealousy isn't because He is missing out; it's because we are.

With that context in mind, let's look at another Old Testament passage.

Read Isaiah 62:4-5. Why might Isaiah say that God rejoices over Israel as a groom rejoices over his bride?

Though Israel had been repeatedly unfaithful, God said that He would change her name. He would not just change her external circumstances but also her internal character. This communicates a total transformation for the people of God. Like so many other places in Scripture, these names are significant.

Why is it significant that God called His people *My Delight Is in Her and Married?*

What do these names tell us about God's feelings for His people?

We are His Bride. He has done all the work for us. He paid the bride-price. Jesus provided our garments of white. The ceremony, the reception—it's all Him.

Earlier, we saw that God called Israel *my people* when He described their slavery in Egypt. He was not ignorant of their plight. He wasn't ignoring their prayers. God was faithfully listening. God made it clear to Moses that He had been watching out for His people even though they couldn't see Him. This was true for Israel, and it's true for you and me as well.

Read Isaiah 49:13. Are you in a season of affliction right now? If so, with what are you struggling?

Notice in Isaiah 49:13, the Lord promises future compassion on His people. This may be a prophetic promise to be fulfilled in Jesus or simply a steadfast confidence in the character of God. Either way, we receive the compassion, and I don't know about you, but I'm grateful for that.

How does the work of Jesus demonstrate God's compassion toward you?

How does the character of God give you hope for your current circumstance?

God has chosen Israel and now the church as His people. Through Jesus Christ, God's possession of us as the Bride of Christ is irrevocable and secure. We have been bought and paid for. Remember, this possession is protective and promise-filled. What a privilege to be His!

DAY TWO

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO THE BRIDE

We established in our Day One personal study that we as the church are the Bride of Christ. However, I think in some ways we serve another wedding day role: bridesmaids.

In our current culture, what are some ways the bridesmaids take care of the bride?

Of course the analogy eventually breaks down, but in a sense, you and I are like bridesmaids, making sure that the Bride is as lovely and wedding day ready as she can be. Our goal is for the Bride to look radiant. We are partly responsible for what those outside the Christian faith think of the Bride.

Read John 17:1-26. What are some of the ways Jesus describes those who are His? Which attributes listed in this passage would help make the Bride look most beautiful?

What does it mean to you that Jesus is praying for you?

It's clear that Jesus deeply loves His people. The question is: Do we love the Bride the way Jesus does? Do we mirror His love for us to one another? Unfortunately, the answer is usually, *no*. In fact, there's been a pretty dramatic negative trend lately. It seems many of the bridesmaids have turned on the Bride.

Have you noticed? Somewhere along the way, we bailed on the Bride. We threw her under the bus and decided to take her down a notch. I've noticed those "open letters" circulating on the Internet, detailing all that is wrong in our churches. I started hearing phrases such as, "I love Jesus, but I don't like the church." I can't imagine what would happen if someone walked up to Chad, my husband, and said something like, "You know, Chad. You're a cool guy, and I like

hanging out with you. But I can't stand your wife. She's such a pain." I don't think my husband would take kindly to those remarks. How dare we say to God, "I like You, but Your Bride is trash"? The Bride that we treat with such contempt is the same one Jesus gave His life for—and entrusted the gospel to.

Why do you think many of us have such disdain for the church?

I'm sure there are myriad reasons, but I think one rises to the top. We have abandoned the corporate call of the church for the singular seduction of self. We choose *me* over *we*.

Scripture records an early example of a couple who fell on this slippery slope of self. In Acts 5 we are introduced to Ananias and Sapphira. The couple sold a portion of land. The biblical text indicates they had pledged the full proceeds from the sale to the early church; but when it came time to present the money from the sale, they only gave a portion of it.² Scripture tells us that the married couple had conspired together to keep some of the money for themselves. When Ananias alone presented the gift to Peter, it seems the Holy Spirit informed Peter of Ananias's deception.

At Peter's Spirit-filled indictment, Ananias died. Not in a slang, *I could have died* kind of way. No. Ananias "fell down and breathed his last," according to Acts 5:5 (ESV). Later, the co-conspirator, Sapphira, came in, unaware of what had happened with her husband. When questioned by Peter, she told the same lie. Peter confronted her, and as her husband had done, Sapphira "fell down ... and breathed her last" (Acts 5:10, ESV).

We don't know exactly what motivated Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit, to attempt to deceive the apostles, and to inflate their own egos. But self-interest seems to be a motivating factor. As with so many other biblical tales of caution, we think, *they were so foolish. Or, I'd never do something like that.*

But friend, we can and we do. That's why I think I know, even if I don't like to admit it, what Ananias and Sapphira might have been thinking. I can't say when or how, but I believe somewhere along the way they started to think that their spiritual reputations were more important than their spiritual health. They bought and sold the lie that appearances are the stuff of reality.

That's a cancerous lie that can nearly suck the life out of a community of believers. I'm so ashamed to admit it, but I so get it. We'd rather show off than show up. Have you seen it? Have you sensed it? Have you been a part of it?

We choose *me* over *we* when we want to look committed rather than be committed. We choose *me* over *we* when we are consumed with what's wrong with the church rather than considering what's right. We choose *me* over *we* when we decide to air our grievances or gossip instead of praying for perseverance or a way to help. We choose *me* over *we* when we become convinced that what's wrong with the church is everybody else's fault.

Before we go any further, let's get super honest. Whether publicly, in frustrated chats during a girls' night out, or in the dark places of our hearts, each of us has, from time to time, beaten up on the Bride a bit. And friend, every time we do, we make her less lovely.

Do you believe that you play a part in helping the Bride look wedding day ready? Explain.

When have you let your frustrations with a person or a situation affect your affections for the church as a whole? Describe the situation.

Many of us have endured real hurt or abuse within the church. The Bride is not perfect. I'm so thankful for Jesus, the Healer, who binds up our wounds and leads us to reconciliation.

Today write a prayer, speaking your pain authentically. Invite Jesus to begin (or continue) healing your heart. Ask Him to help you fall back in love with the Bride He adores.

If your church ceased to exist today, how would that impact your life?
How would it impact your community?

What objections have you had or do you now have to being a
committed part of a local church?

If you could change one thing about the church, in general, or your
church specifically, what would it be? Why?

What do you love most about your church? Why?

Now go back and read over your assessment. Do your answers bring
joy or break your heart? Are you encouraged or despairing? Pleased or
ashamed? What has God revealed to you through this exercise?

Close this time by praying for your church. It may be a prayer of
gratefulness, concern, or both. Just express your heart to the Lord.

DAY FOUR

BEAR THE CROSS, LOVE THE BRIDE

All four Gospel accounts record Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem just days before His crucifixion. Matthew 21; Mark 11; Luke 19; and John 12 all record Jesus riding into the city on a colt or small donkey. Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy that the Messiah would come into the city as a humble king, sitting on a donkey (Zech. 9:9). Fully intending to turn their expectations upside down, Jesus didn't parade into town in majestic military might or pomp. He wasn't the warrior king they expected, and yet the people cheered for Jesus just the same.

As Jesus entered the city, the Gospel writers all affirm that the people were in a near frenzy, cheering and praising Jesus, waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (Matt. 21:9). While all four Gospels record this event, only Luke and John record a sad asterisk to the memorable day. Luke records Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and rebuking the unbelief of the people (Luke 19:41-44). John's Gospel confirmed Israel's failure of faith (John 12:37-50). (Matthew 21 and Mark 11 communicate similar spiritual truths but illustrate them through parables and the cursing of the fig tree.)

Jesus knew that some of the people who were there that day, waving their branches, swept up in the frenzy of emotion would turn on Him within a few days. Their songs of praise would be replaced with jeers and insults.

Here is the sad truth. Many people that day reveled in seeing the celebrity but missed seeing the Savior. On that glorious Palm Sunday, Jesus came riding in as a popular hero. But within days, He would be the Suffering Servant—sacrificing Himself for the sake of the world and setting the example of cross-bearing and death to self for His followers.

Friend, so many of our Sunday mornings are filled with popular, palm branch waving kind of worship—all celebrity, little Savior. Jesus saw the people who were merely swept up in a movement, caught up in the moment. He knew they weren't sincere. That kind of "worship" is still around today, and it's still not OK. I suspect it still makes Jesus weep.

John provides another account of Jesus' grief at the people's disbelief. John records that Jesus didn't just grieve for the people who misunderstood Him, those who lacked belief. Jesus also grieved for those who did believe, but were afraid to live that belief because of what it might cost them.

Read John 12:42-43. According to verse 42, why did some not confess Him?

What does verse 43 identify as the underlying reason?

Do you think we have some would-be Jesus followers who have the same problem today? Explain.

Believing in Jesus and the message of the gospel will mess with us. It's life changing and hope giving, yes. But the change it brings is messy. Jesus' call to come and die, to take up our crosses and follow Him often creates problems for us. Surrender is messy because our flesh is stubborn. Sacrifice is messy because we like to be in control. The reality is: The gospel messes with us. The gospel refuses to leave us as we once were, or even as we are now. The gospel is always at work changing us, and change is messy and hard.

More than that, the gospel is costly. Jesus didn't deny the messiness or the cost. Perhaps that's why Jesus' encouragement to His disciples is filled with the call to persevere through hardship, expect persecution, and commit to cross-bearing. Jesus never promised health, wealth, and prosperity. The Gospels record that He was grieved when many chose not to endure the cost.

How is God using the gospel to make changes in your life? How is the gospel "messing" with you?

How are you finding joy, hope, and purpose in the midst of your walk with Christ, even if it is difficult?

As I mentioned before, there is a growing segment of American Christians who say they “love Jesus but dislike the church.” We know pain caused in the church and by the church is a real and legitimate concern. Many, many Christians have been deeply wounded by leaders and fellow members alike. While those who have been hurt by the church may be the most vocal, they actually do not represent the majority of the “Jesus but not the church” subgroup. Research by the Barna Group found that “Christians who do not attend church say it’s primarily not out of wounding, but because they can find God elsewhere or that church is not personally relevant to them.”³

Do you agree that someone can find God or grow spiritually outside the church just as well as they can inside the church? Explain.

What do you think it means for the church to be personally relevant to someone? Does that matter? Why or why not?

Name some ways we abandon the church even though we may still attend.

Friend, thanks for dealing with some hard questions. I know this isn’t fun, but perhaps it will be healthy and healing. I don’t want you to think this is some form of entrapment. Believe me, when I asked myself these questions and then held my answers up against the truth of Scripture, I found that I was a selfish, unhelpful bridesmaid. Hopefully, you’re not. Hopefully, you’ve been loyal, faithful, and steadfast. But just in case, like me, you’ve become a bit selfish when it comes to church, I want us to admit it. The Spirit doesn’t usually change what we won’t admit. And I can tell you that the Holy Spirit wants to change me. I’m desperate to passionately pursue the readiness and beauty of the church that Christ loves and died for. How about you?

DAY FIVE

APPRAISE AND APPLY

Each week, our final day will be a time for us to reflect on what we've studied. Listen, I've been that girl who didn't get her personal study done and had to rush through all five days of personal study mere hours before Bible study. Friend, this is a grace place. It happens. I get it! But no matter what your week may have looked like, I'd encourage you not to rush past our Day Five questions. We aren't just collecting information. Our goal is transformation. This is the silence that the Holy Spirit fills with His words. This is the place where we meditate on the Word and let it change, correct, and mature us.

First, go back and highlight, underline, box in, or shade all the Scripture we've studied. It's been a lot! Yay, God! Yay, you! It's cool to celebrate the wins, friend. Now, what have we learned?

What passage taught you something new about God?

What passage taught you something convicting about yourself?

Name two specific things you want to study, do, or change because of this week's study.

How do you feel now about being God's possession? What does that mean to you?

Now when you think about the Bride of Christ, what comes to mind?
Are you helping or hindering her?

If someone were to look at your life or read your Bible study book answers, would they think you have a positive, negative, or indifferent opinion of the church? Explain.

How have you sometimes celebrated Jesus without surrendering to His lordship?

Let's close this review time with prayer. First, write a prayer of hope for the church in general.

Finish by writing a prayer of hope for your church.