

The 7 Churches of Revelation:



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Roman Roads: The expression “all roads lead to Rome” comes from the fact that Rome was the first major empire that had a vast system of roads that connected their territories, providences, and cities to the capital city of Rome. Galatians 4:4 reads, “But when the **fullness of time** had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,”. (*emphasis added by author*) The Gospel was given at the exact time God wanted Jesus to be born. Part of what helped the gospel reach so far and wide was the system of roads the Romans had built. One major road connected the 7 churches of the book of revelation.

Actual Cities and Churches: These churches are not metaphors or symbols but actual cities and churches that were established by the apostles. When speaking to these churches Jesus will make references to current events (Nicolaitans and Laodicea’s water issues) and allusions to Israel’s past (Balaam and Jezebel).

Incorrect View: While this series is not looking to take a side when it comes to different views of eschatology (*study of the end times*), it is important to stress that eisegesis (*reading one’s own thoughts into the text*) is never the right way to read the

scripture. One view on the churches that has been popular in the past has done this. This is the view that the churches mention in chapters 2 & 3 are representative of the ages of the church. This has been put forward by popular author Tim LaHaye in his book *Revelation Unveiled* (p. 38). The major problem with this view is that it is found nowhere in the text. Furthermore, there is nothing remotely authoritative concerning the years used for each age of the church.

The 7 Churches:

Ephesus: Known as the most prominent church of its time, the church of Ephesus was located close by a major port in the Aegean Sea. The city possessed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world—the temple of Artemis. Paul, the apostle, founded this church. You can find his interactions with this church in Acts 19. Paul also wrote this church a letter—the book of Ephesians in our Bibles.

Smyrna: The home of the famous author Homer (not Simpson) and the temple of Athena. Smyrna was also a port city and had a booming economy. Smyrna was also the home of Polycarp who was a disciple of John and an important Christian martyr.

Pergamum: The provincial capital of the Roman province. It also had one of the largest libraries, nearly the size of the library of Alexandria.

Thyatira: Acts 16 included the story of a believer named Lydia who came to believe under Paul's ministry. This city was known for their trade in purple dye.

Sardis: The ancient capital of Lydia, it was conquered by nation after nation when finally given to the Roman empire. This city was destroyed by an earthquake in 17AD but was rebuilt.

Philadelphia: Known for their grapes, textiles, and leather goods, Philadelphia was also the entryway to a much larger region through which the early church sent missionaries. This city is named after the koine Greek word for brotherly love, “phílos”.

Laodicea: While there were several cities named Laodicea, the specific city here is Laodicea ad Lycum. Another major seaport and trade center. Known for their wealth and problems getting reliable water.

Today: Nothing remains of these churches today. Persecution intensified after Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453. Estimates place the current number of Christians at about two percent of Turkey's population.

Ephesus: The Apathetic Church



Welcome Back: Out of all the churches in the Book of Revelation we know the most about this one. Acts 19 gives us its beginnings and their first major struggle. A silversmith who made idols was upset to see so many customers no longer needed his services. He used fear and anger to rile up others into a near riot. Then later, Paul the apostle (who founded this church) wrote them a letter we know as the Book of Ephesians.

The Good: Much like the Bereans (Acts 17:11), the Ephesian church did not accept the authority or teaching of just anyone but put them to the test of scripture. This should be an encouragement to us to do the same. Someone may call themselves an Apostle or prophet, but is what they are saying consistent with the Bible?

The Bad: Jesus has this against them, they have forgotten their first love. It is possible and likely that anything can take away our affection for God if we put that in front of Him. Exposing false teachers is good. But if we put that before God, it weakens our affection for him. Jesus threatens that if the church of Ephesus does not repent, he will remove their lampstand.

The Ugly: A group of people are mentioned twice in Revelation—the “Nicolaitans.” We are unsure of who they are. They are listed under gnostic heresy and many scholars believe they may have been Antinomians. Antinomianism was the belief that rejected God’s law and they thought a believer could sin as much as they wanted because grace would increase. To this the apostle Paul said in Romans 6:1-2, **“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”**

Questions:

1. Do you know how to test teaching to see if it is in the truth? If so, how?
2. What would make someone a false apostle?
3. Have you ever loved Jesus more than you do today? If yes, what has made your love for him to grow less?

Smyrna: The Suffering Church



Persecution was the Norm: After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, the Christians minority was no longer seen as part of the Jewish people. This resulted in them being the scape goat for many problems Rome had. Emperor Nero famously blamed Christians for a string of fires that happened under his rule. The Church of Smyrna appears to have undergone worse persecution than the rest.

Rich and Poor: One of the first avenues of persecution a society will enact is going after the target's finances. Either through law or by slander, they will take away the target's occupation, then take away any land or standing they may have in the community. The believers in Smyrna were known to be poor but Christ calls them rich. Being rich in Christ has nothing to do with how much money one has. The currency Roman had is now dust but the treasures these believers received will last an eternity. Having or not having wealth is not an indication of God's favor or blessing.

Do Not Fear: Those three words are repeated over and over in the scriptures. When we are going through tribulation, we can also hear the voice of Christ tell us "Do not Fear." Jesus tells them what they will suffer and who is to blame. These group of Jews were slandering this community to get them thrown into prison. Jesus then reminds them of who the true enemy is— the Devil. The Devil is working through this group of Jews.

The Second Death: Verse 11 makes a reference to the second death. This is a foreshadowing of what John will see in Revelation 21:8 of the Lake of Fire. This is the confidence we have in Christ that this is not for us if we "conquer."

Questions:

1. Have you ever had a time when you suffered for God? If so, describe the situation.
2. Recall a time in your life when you needed to hear the words, "Do not fear".

3. Do you pray for the persecuted church? If not, make a plan today when and how you will pray for our brothers and sisters around the world who need strength to endure to the end.

Pergamum: The Church Behind Enemy Lines



Satan's Throne: Where does Satan live?

Denying the faith: Giving even more credence to the fact that Jesus was speaking specifically to those churches and not using them as a metaphor. He references a current event. The murder of Antipas the faithful witness. Much like the church of Smyrna, this church also was experiencing persecution. While it had been difficult, they hadn't denied the faith.

What are different ways we are encouraged to deny our faith?

A few things: Jesus doesn't just have one issue with them but several. It would appear like a lot, the believers in Pergamum have started to conform to the pattern they saw before them.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans: Jesus makes a reference to the Old Testament prophet Balaam. He says there are people among them that hold to the teaching of Balaam. Jesus explains what He means in verse 14. Unable to curse Israel, Balaam shows the King of Moab how to do greater harm. To compromise and introduce idol worship and sexual immorality (Numbers 24). Where Satan cannot conquer, he seeks to corrupt.

The Next Promise: Following the pattern of the other two churches, Jesus has a promise for the conquerors. This promise is so wonderful it is hard to comprehend. You have a new name that only Jesus and you know.

Questions:

1. How have you felt the need to compromise your faith?
2. In what ways is it easy to fall into "Balaam's teaching"?

3. How does reading Rev. 2:17 strengthen you against compromise?

Thyatira: The First Church of Jezebel



Eyes Like Fire: Jesus refers back to John's description of him in several of these letters. To the church in Thyatira, he reminds them he has eyes like fire and feet like burnished bronze. Both of these images are symbolic of God's judgement as seen in Daniel's visions in Daniel 7&10. The reference to the eye is reminiscent of Jesus' promise that what is hidden will be made known (Matt. 10:26) and Paul's instruction that fire will test everyone's work (1 Cor. 3:13).

Love, Faith, Service, and Endurance: If there is any encouragement from the church in Thyatira for us today, it is this reassurance: Jesus is about to expose some serious sin and malfunction in this church but first he speaks about what is precious in his sight. Their love, faith, service, and endurance. When these come from a sincere heart of love, they are not ignored.

Jezebel: As Jesus begins to expose the trouble in this church, he gets to the very root of it—a woman he labels "Jezebel." Assuming this was not actually this woman's real name, Jesus is referring to the most evil woman in the Old Testament. Queen Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, King of Israel. Queen Jezebel persecuted the true prophets of God and promoted Baal worship. Eventually, she was thrown from a high window by the very men she had emasculated. (2 Kings 9:30-37)

False Prophecy: Jesus says that she "calls herself a prophetess." The obvious inference is that she is not. False prophecy in the Old Testament was deadly. When Queen Jezebel's husband Ahab was preparing for a battle, he inquired of prophets. All except one gave false prophecies, which Ahab followed to his death. This false prophetess' teachings were leading to her and her followers' death.

Jezebel's Teachings: She was teaching Christ's servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. Let's look at each of these in the context of first century Rome.

Sexual Immorality: In the Corinthian church, one of the issues that the apostle Paul wrote about was their fondness for temple prostitution. We do not know if Jezebel was encouraging the believers in Thyatira to indulge in in this sexual immorality or some other communal sexual deviance. It may have been temple prostitution since Jesus' other charge was eating food sacrificed to idols. What we do know is that what was being taught by this woman was abhorrent to Christ.

Food Sacrificed to Idols: This is not the first time the topic of eating food sacrificed to idols has come up in the New Testament. Paul, when writing to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 8), seems to see this topic as a secondary issue and relevant to the conscience of the individual. There are no conditions in scripture and these two portions of scripture are not in conflict. In context, the reference in Revelation is not just about eating the food sacrificed to idols but this church was actually doing so as a form of worship. Both acts are part of the "deep things of Satan."

A threat and a warning: Christ gave Jezebel time to repent of her sexual immorality. Much like Pharaoh, Jezebel hardens her heart first. Now Christ will harden her heart and place a plague on her and her followers. Those who committed adultery with her had an opportunity to escape this plague.

Jezebel's Children: There are two opinions on who Jezebel's children are.

1. Actual children born from sexual immorality.
2. Disciples of Jezebel.

Since Jesus just referenced her followers who had a chance to repent and be saved from this judgment, it is likely that Jezebel's children are those who will not repent and thus prove they are not the sons and daughters of God but children of the devil.

2 Encouragements and Promises: The start of the letter began with a commendation of the good works done by the faithful. The end is an encouragement to believers to continue to persevere and to conquer. The promise for the conquerors is reminiscent of 2 Tim. 2:12 of reigning with Christ.

Questions:

1. How might the description of Jesus with eyes of fire and feet of bronze, conflict with how many see Jesus?
2. What would a "Jezebel" look like today? Can it refer to a man as well?
3. Does Jesus make people sick?

4. How does Jezebel's teachings influence those who claim to be Christians today?

Sardis: The Zombie Church



The letter to the church of Sardis is unique among the letters so far. While the others first received commendation then condemnation, Sardis only receives condemnation. They seem like a church that is dedicated to Christ but inwardly they have no light. Jesus refers to Himself as “He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars”. The “seven Spirits” are a reference to (Isaiah 11:2-5 and Rev. 5:6) and are a number of completion. This church has shut out the ministry of the Spirit and are near death. Jesus, the great physician, is doing emergency surgery!

Be Sensitive to Sin (verse 2) Wake up!!! Christ charges them with works that are not complete. They have fallen asleep to sin, thinking they can coast on their reputation and will be fine where they are.

Be Supportive of the Faithful (verses 2, 4) Not everyone in this church is dying and dead. They are said to have garments that are unsoiled and white. It would appear that even among the deadest of congregations, there are those seek out life.

Be Subject to the Authority of God’s Word (verse 3) Those in Sardis received a good word. Now they need to go back and live it.

Be Sorry and Repent of Sin (verse 3) This church is about to read of things concerning judgements. Those who are dead to the Spirit will curse God when judgments happen, but they will not repent. This does not have to be them.

Be Hopeful (verses 5&6) There is hope for this church and those in it. The one who makes dead things live can make them alive once more. He promises white garments and a name that will never be blotted out of the book of life.

Questions:

1. What does a dead church look like? How does a dead church become alive again?
2. Jesus uses the phrase “like a thief” in verse 3. How does this connect to other times in the Bible that, the phrase is used? (Revelation 16:15; Matthew 24:43; 1 Thessalonians 5:2,4; 2 Peter 3:10)
3. In what ways does the church in America need to “wake up?”

Philadelphia: The Church of Brotherly Love



Philadelphia was founded by the Pergamene king, Attalus II, whose nickname was “Philadelphus” which means “brother lover.” This city was a missionary city of the Hellenistic, philosophy, religion, and language. Philadelphia was chosen as a mission city because of their access to the greater region to the east. Like most cities in this region, they were prone to have earthquakes. In A.D. 17, an earthquake that destroyed Sardis and ten other cities also destroyed Philadelphia.

Holy and True: Christ describes himself to this church in two ways. The first is as “the holy one.” The word holy here is the Greek word “Hagios.” This word is in relation to incomparable majesty. This is the attribute of God whereby we sense the presence of the “Wholly Other” (Alan Johnson). Christ’s other descriptor is “True one.” The word true here is the Greek word “Alethinos.” This is the ultimate reality and not true as we “understand it.” Christ tells this church that he is, wholly **OTHER** and wholly **IS**.

Keys of David: This is nearly a word for word quote of Isaiah 22:20-22. This is the authority and sovereignty of Christ as Messiah.

Open Doors: Christ promises this church an open door. This city itself was an open door to the east that Rome used to “evangelize” the region in their traditions. Believers from Philadelphia would see this as an open door as well and the Gospel spread rapidly through the region. The open-door Christ is referring to may also be the invitation for all (Jews and Gentiles) to be in right relationship with YHWH. (The letter to the Laodicea church gives even more credibility to this point of view.)

When is a Jew not a Jew? Jesus makes reference to a group of people who “say that they are Jews and are not.” From Christ’s perspective a Jew is not someone who is a blood relative of Abraham. (Matt. 3:9 & Romans 9:6) Paul and Peter are Jews because they are not only descended from Abraham but also have found forgiveness and life in Jesus. Historically Philadelphia will have issues much like the church in Galatia with Judaizers. Church father, Ignatius, will write to this church a few years later to not listen to “any one propounding Judaism unto you.”

The Synagogue of Satan: This group is also mentioned in the letter to Smyrna. In Smyrna they persecuted the believers and handed them over to the civil authorities. In Philadelphia they may be doing the same thing, but Christ's encouragement is that they will see that He loves the believers in the Church and that this "Synagogue of Satan" will also see Christ's love for this church. This is a reversal of the promises in the OT (such as Isa. 45:14) in which the Gentile nations would bow before Israel and acknowledge that God is with them. Now Christ promises that these Jews (who are not Jews from Christ's perspective) will bow before these Gentiles and acknowledge that God is with them because of the love of Christ.

Patient Endurance: Christ praises this church for keeping his word twice. The first is a general praise found in verse 8. In verse 10, he says they have "kept my word about patient endurance." The journey we walk with Christ is a marathon not a sprint. Many can be bold and courageous for a season, but few are found to keep standing year after year. He further encourages their endurance in verse 11 telling them that he is coming soon.

A Pillar in the Temple: Being an earthquake prone region, few people lived in the city but instead chose to live on the outskirts. At the slightest tremor, many would leave the city fleeing the pending destruction. When people returned to the city, the only structures that would be left were the strongest buildings with the strongest pillars. Great men and women's names would be on these pillars as a special honor. Christ's promise is that while they are not honored among these people they will be honored and made strong among God's people.

3 Names: Three names are written on the one who "conquers."

- **God's Name:** Perhaps, YHWH God's proper name or covenant name in the Old Testament.
- **New Jerusalem:** The city Abraham was looking for, with foundations, whose architect was the Lord. If the synagogue of Satan was persecuting these gentile believers for not being Jews, these believers would be pillars in the New Jerusalem.
- **Jesus' New Name:** This could be a reference to the Name of Christ that no one knows but Himself (Rev.19:12).

Questions:

1. How does seeing Jesus as Holy, True, and with the keys of David effect the way you live your life?
2. What open doors has God given you and this church?
3. What part of patient endurance do you find most difficult?
4. What should our priorities be as a local church?

Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church



A wealthy city: Laodicea, like many cities in their region, was devastated by earthquakes in A.D. 17. Unlike other cities, they refused imperial help and rebuilt the city on their own. Their economy was built on textiles and medicine. They had a famous school of medicine and a special ointment known as “Phrygian powder.” A major market was also located in the city.

Christ’s Description: This letter starts with a threefold description of Jesus. “The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” When Christ addresses a church that is falling into disobedience, he is to them the “amen” of God in faithfulness and in true witness, the only one who rules the earth since its source and origin is He.

I know your works: Jesus says these words to 5 out of the 7 churches. For 2 of these churches Christ follows up this statement of knowing their works with a statement of woe. The first church was Sardis - who was dead - and the second is Laodicea. The statement “Jesus knows my heart” is true but it can be a statement of joy or dread based on the person saying it.

Hot and Cold Water: The city of Hierapolis seven miles to the north of Laodicea had famous hot springs. The city of Colossae, less than ten miles away, had an abundance of fresh cool water. Laodicea had a six-mile-long aqueduct to the south to bring in water. If they tried to transport cold water, it would be warm by the time it reached the city and hot water would cool.

Hot and Cold Believers: When reading this letter, the Laodicean believer would have caught on right away to what Christ is saying. Hot or cold water are useful and life giving, drinking tepid water was gross and made you want to spit it out. An incorrect interpretation of the metaphor of hot and cold here is regarding one’s spiritual temperature. If cold means to be unsaved or hostile then it contradicts 2 Peter 3:9. While the application of hot and cold referring to spiritual temperature is familiar to us, it would have been alien to first century believers.

Questions:

1. In Christ's "counsel" to the Laodiceans what references is he making to the Laodicean economy?

2. How dangerous is self-deception?

3. Is Revelation 3:20 for Christians or non-Christians?

4. Explain Rev. 3:20 in the context of the letter to the Laodiceans.

5. Compare Hebrew 10:11-14 and Revelation 3:21.