

A Survey of Revelation
Week 3: Letters to the Seven Churches
Revelation 2:1-3:22

A Brief Overview of the Book of Revelation

A. Introduction to the Book (Revelation 1)

B. Letters to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)

1. The Letter to the Church in Ephesus (2:1-7)
2. The Letter to the Church in Smyrna (2:8-11)
3. The Letter to the Church in Pergamum (2:12-17)
4. The Letter to the Church in Thyatira (2:18-29)
5. The Letter to the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)
6. The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)
7. The Letter to the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

This week, we are here!

C. The End of the World As We Know It: God’s Judgment Upon the World and Satan (Revelation 4-19:5)

1. The Vision of Heaven and the “Beginning of the End” (4:1-5:14)
2. The “Seal” Judgments (6:1-8:1)
3. The “Trumpet” Judgments (8:2-11:19)
4. The Conflict with the False Trinity (12:1-14:20)
5. The “Bowl” Judgments (15:1-16:21)
6. The End of the World (17:1-19:5)

D. A Whole New World: The Return of Christ and the New Heavens and the New Earth (Revelation 19:6-22:21)

1. The Return of Christ and the Millennium Kingdom (19:6-20:15)
2. The New Heavens and the New Earth (21:1-22:11)
3. Epilogue to Revelation (22:12-21)

Letter to the Seven Churches: Introduction

The Vision of Jesus and His Church (Revelation 1:12-20)

- The book of Revelation begins (in earnest) with a command to John by Jesus (see Revelation 1:19-20) to write letters to seven churches that existed in Asia Minor towards the end of the first century. What follows in Revelation 2-3, then, are seven letters written to these seven churches.
- But as we noted last week, the letters aren't written to the congregation or even the pastor of the church; they're written to the "angel" of the church. What does this mean? There are two main theories proposed:
 - o **The "messenger" theory:** It could mean simply "messenger"; in Greek, "angel" (*angelos*) can mean that. Thus the "messenger" of the church could be its lead pastor, bishop, etc. The problem with this view, however, is that in no other place in Revelation does *angelos* mean "messenger."
 - o **The literal "angel" theory:** It's probably best to take this literally: each of God's churches has a "guardian" angel over it—including ours! And the "angel" of a church is seen by God as the representative of the community.

"These are angels God has placed in charge of the churches... They are addressed in the seven letters as representatives of the churches, as embodying God's intention for the churches, and they are asked to intervene in the spiritual needs of the churches. Addressing each letter to the angel God had assigned to superintend the churches in that city tells each church that they are not just an assembly meeting on earth; all of heaven is involved in their life and conduct. Through them God oversees his plan worked out in their midst. Their earthly life and the heavenly reality underlying it are interdependent aspects of the Christian life."

- Grant Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse*

The Letters Themselves: An Introduction (Revelation 2-3)

- Once we have this introduction to these letters in Revelation 1:12-20, we get to the letters themselves. Each of the seven letters follow a similar pattern:
 1. **Introduction:** A command for John to write to the Angel/Church.
 2. **Description of Jesus:** A unique description of Jesus that speaks special relevancy to what each church is going through.
 3. **Praise for Church:** One or more things Jesus is pleased with about each church.
 4. **Criticism for Church:** One or more things that Jesus is not pleased with.
 5. **Call to Action:** What Jesus says the church needs to do. Often combined with a reminder of His future coming.
 6. **Promise to the Faithful:** A call to listen to what Jesus says and a promise to those who do what He says.

Summary Chart for the Seven Letters¹

Church	Description of Jesus	Praise	Criticism	Call to Action	Promise
Ephesus (2:1-7) "Loveless"	Jesus holds the stars and walks among the lampstands	Hard work Patient endurance Rejects evil Perseverance	Forsaken their first love	Repent and do the works you did at first	You will eat from the tree of life
Smyrna (2:8-11) "Suffering"	Jesus is the first and he last; the one who died and came to life	Endured suffering and poverty and yet are rich!		Remain faithful even when facing prison, persecution or death	The crown of life; will not be hurt by the second death
Pergamum (2:12-17) "Worldly"	Jesus has the sharp, double-edged sword	Loyalty to Christ; refuse to deny him	Tolerates cults, heresies, idolatry and immorality	Repent!	Hidden manna and a stone with a new name on it
Thyatira (2:18-29) "Wrong Doctrine"	The son of God with eyes like blazing fire and feet like bronze	Love, faith, works, patient endurance, constant improvement	Tolerates pagan cults, idolatry and immorality	Repent! Judgment is coming	Those who hold fast will be given authority and the morning star
Sardis (3:1-5) "Spiritually Dead"	Jesus holds the stars and spirit(s) of God		Deeds are lacking; the church is spiritually dead	Strengthen what little faith remains	The one who repents will be victorious and have salvation
Philadelphia (3:7-13) "Spiritually Alive"	Jesus is holy and true who holds the keys of David	Kept the word of God and have not denied Jesus		Keep doing what you already have done	Those in the church will be a pillar of God
Laodicea (3:14-22) "Complacent"	Jesus is the "amen," faithful and true, the ruler of creation		The church lacks anything good about it; they are spiritually poor	Repent! Invite Jesus into your church!	Those who overcome will sit on Jesus' throne

Note: Not every church receives a praise and not every church receives criticism.

[1] There are **three churches** that Jesus both praises and criticizes – **Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira.**

[2] There are **two churches** that Jesus only has criticisms for – **Sardis and Laodicea.**

[3] There are **two churches** that Jesus only has praise for – **Smyrna and Philadelphia.**

But what do we learn from these churches? That's what we'll see next.

¹ Adapted from <https://www.agapebiblestudy.com/charts/The%20Seven%20Churches%20of%20the%20Revelation.htm>

Four Lessons from the Seven Churches

What Makes a Church?

Lesson 1: Truth Matters...

The Churches at Pergamum (2:12-17) and Thyatira (2:18-29)

- The Church at Pergamum (2:12-17):

- Pergamum was the capitol city of the Roman province of Asia. It was also the religious center of Asia; there were temples and shrines dedicated to many Greek gods and goddesses: Zeus, Athena, Dionysus and Asclepius. It was also the first city to erect a temple to Augustus Caesar in AD 29, worshipping him as a god ***while he was still alive!***
 - This is likely why Jesus says that Pergamum dwells in the city “where Satan has his throne” (2:13). The Imperial Cult—and thus the religion of Satan—was strong in that city.
 - This also might be why Jesus refers to himself as the one with the “double-edged sword” (2:12). The sword was a symbol of the Roman Empire, but Jesus is making it clear that HE has true authority of this earth.
- It’s clear that Jesus is pleased with the commitment that the church has had to Him; they have not lost their faith even when one of their members, Antipas, was killed for his faith (2:13).
- At the same time, however, Jesus is not pleased with their tolerance of false teachers. Jesus mentions two groups of false teachers that the church follows:
 - First, Jesus mentions those that follow the teachings of “Balaam” (2:14). This is a reference to an Old Testament teacher who led the Israelites into sin. Thus, there is some teacher in Pergamum who is probably teaching that it’s OK to participate in the Imperial Cult, practice immorality, etc.
 - Second, Jesus mentions the “Nicolaitans” (2:15). Though we don’t know exactly who they are (they’re also mentioned in 2:6 in reference to Ephesus), they were probably a group of teachers who went around claiming to be Apostles, leading people astray.
- Jesus warns the church at Pergamum that if they don’t do something about the false teachers, He will: He will personally fight against those that tolerate false teaching! (2:16).
- If they do get rid of them, Jesus will give a stone to that person with a new name that only that person knows! (2:17b).

- The Church at Thyatira (2:18-28):
 - Thyatira was known especially in the first century for its **guild trades**; it was a city that produced cloth, bronze, leather working and pottery.
 - Often, it was impossible to do business among these trades without paying homage to the Imperial Cult and the emperors of Rome, both present and future.
 - Though Jesus recognizes that the church in many ways is “on the right track”—they are doing more good deeds than they used to—he is concerned about how the church has tolerated the teachings of “Jezebel” (2:20).
 - This is likely an allusion to the “Jezebel” of 1 Kings 16, the evil wife of King Ahab.
 - From what Jesus says in Revelation 2:20-21, it seems that this Jezebel is an active member of the church, and is teaching that immorality doesn’t matter in the Christian life since Jesus forgives all.
 - Perhaps some of her teaching also taught that it was OK to participate in the worship of other gods in order to maintain customers and make money.
 - Jesus makes it clear that those who participate in immorality with Jezebel, those who tolerate her teachings (her “children” – 2:23) and even Jezebel herself will experience intense suffering.
 - Those who reject her and her teachings, however, will be spared from further hardship (2:24) and will be able to rule with Jesus at the end of time, receiving as a reward Christ Himself.

Lesson: Strong witness and faithfulness in the face of opposition is important for Jesus’ church. But so is right teaching. A church is not a church if it tolerates error within it.

Lesson 2: Truth Matters...But So Does Love

The Church at Ephesus (2:1-7)

- The church in Ephesus is perhaps the most famous church in our Bibles. It was founded by the Apostle Paul (Acts 19:1-20), and was the church that he stayed the longest at—three years (Acts 20:31). It also is a church that has three separate letters written to it in our Bibles (other than the one found in Revelation): not only is the letter of Ephesians written to it, but 1 and 2 Timothy are also written to the church in Ephesus, since Timothy was the pastor of that church.
- From the writings we have about the church in Ephesus, we see that a constant struggle the church faced was in regards to false teaching.
 - o When Paul leaves the church at the end of his three-year stay, Paul warns about “wolves” who will “distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30).
 - o In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul repeatedly warns Timothy about false teachers (1 Timothy 1:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:14-3:8) who ultimately are of “depraved” minds (2 Timothy 3:8).
- In Jesus’ words to the church in Ephesus, it becomes clear that the church in Ephesus won the battle against these false teachers:

*“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.**” (Rev. 2:2 NIV)*

*“But you have this in your favor: **You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**” (Rev. 2:6 NIV)*

- But it seems that this fight for “truth” has come with a cost:

*“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.” (Rev 2:4-5a)*

- While there is some debate as to what “love” is being talked about here, it’s probably safe to say that it’s love for one another: their vigilance to eradicate false teaching came at the expense of loving one another. This is no small matter for Jesus:
 - o If they fail to do this, Jesus says that He will remove their witness as a church (Revelation 2:5b).
 - o But if they repent, they will receive what Adam and Eve never did: the tree of life (Revelation 2:7).

Lesson: This is an important reminder: truth matters. Right teaching matters. But we cannot neglect the importance of loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, and loving those around us who need the gospel of Jesus.

Lesson 3: Don't Measure a Church by the World's Standards

The Churches at Sardis (3:1-5) and Laodicea (3:14-22)

The sign of "success" in God's church today is often measured by many in terms of numbers and influence. If a church is growing numerically, if seats are being filled, if giving is up, then that is often taken as a sign of God's "blessing," and the pastors of these churches are usually heralded in the church world as "heroes," being invited to speak at church conferences all over the world to share their "tips" for success.

But while that is how the world often measures the success of a church, is that how Jesus measures the success of His church? The churches of Sardis and Laodicea warn us about using the world's standards to measure Jesus' church.

The Church at Laodicea (3:14-22):

- The city of Laodicea had experienced a devastating earthquake decades before, and they prided themselves on their ability to rebuild without help from Rome. This instilled within the city a "we don't need anybody" mentality, which seems to have spread to the church: we can do it ourselves, we don't need Jesus (cf. Rev. 3:17).
- The church thought this was a positive; Jesus makes it clear that it was a negative:

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. (Rev 3:17 NIV)

- Ultimately, Jesus makes it clear that they did not offer anything positive *spiritually* to those around them—hence the reference to being neither "hot" or "cold" (Rev. 3:16).
 - o This does *not* mean that Jesus would rather have them not be committed to Him than "sort of" committed to them. Instead, this is a reference to the water supply of Laodicea. Laodicea did not have its own water supply; it had to bring in water from two places.
 - To the north of Laodicea was the city of Hierapolis, one source of their water, which was a city famous for having hot mineral springs, known for their healing properties.
 - To the south of Laodicea was the city of Colossae, another source of their water supply, which was a city famous for its cold streams, which made great drinking water.
 - But by the time the water from these two sources reached Laodicea, the hot mixed with the cold and the water was lukewarm and often filled with bad-tasting minerals. It was good for nothing.



Ancient calcified pipes in Laodicea.

- Thus Jesus is saying here that Laodicea is *neither spiritually healing like the hot springs of Hierapolis nor is it spiritually refreshing like the cold springs of Colossae*.
- Ultimately, Laodicea is ineffective, devoid of works, and ultimately useless to God. Though materially wealthy, they are **spiritually poor** (see Rev. 3:17-18). And so Jesus says: I'm going to vomit you out of my mouth (Rev. 3:16).

“Such is the shallowness of all too many rich, but worldly churches...It is not the splendor of the structure or the size of the budget that matters to God. It's the quality of the worship, the effectiveness of the church's witness, the conduct and piety of the church's members.”

- Grant Osborne, *Revelation Verse by Verse*

- Therefore, Jesus tells this church that it needs to repent (Rev. 3:19).

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. (Rev. 3:18 NIV)

Note: Laodicea was a city that prided itself in its **wealth** (“gold”); **textile** (“clothes”) and its **eye salve** (“salve”). Laodicea had these things in spades! But Jesus says—you need these from me, not from the world.

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. (Rev. 3:20 NIV)

- Though this is harsh, it also shows that repentance is possible: Jesus wants the church to come back to it. It is because Jesus *loves* us that He calls us to repent (“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” [Rev. 3:19, NIV]).

The Church at Sardis (3:1-7):

- The city of Sardis had been, at one point, one of the most glorious cities in Asia, though by the end of the first century it had lost some of its luster.
- Nevertheless, it still had many things going for it by the end of the first century: it was nearly impenetrable, and it was a city of great commerce.
- Apparently the church had a strong reputation in the city—it was known and liked:

“You have a reputation of being alive!” (Rev. 3:1b NIV)

- But although from an outsider's perspective it seemed to have everything going for it, Jesus was not pleased with it:

*"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, **but you are dead.**" (Rev 3:1b).*

- We don't know exactly what is going on in this church. But if they enjoyed favor among the city, it could have meant that they had compromised their beliefs, perhaps allowing its members to participate in the Imperial Cult.
- They may have also become complacent about sin, tolerating immorality in the church; hence the command to "wake up" (2:3) and the mention of those who have not "soiled their clothes" (2:4), likely a reference to moral purity.
- Thus Jesus gives a stern warning to this church (Rev. 3:5).

Lesson: "Success" in the world's eyes does not equal "success" in Jesus' eyes. A church is not "successful" if it has a good reputation, if it is popular, even if "giving" is up. What the world values is not what Jesus values. A church is only "successful" if it is doing what Jesus wants it to do.

Lesson 4: Measure a Church by God's Standards

The Churches at Smyrna (2:8-11) and Philadelphia (2:7-13)

The converse of what was said in lesson 3 is also true: often if a church is small and lacking influence, there exists an attitude among some that that church must be doing something wrong. After all, "all healthy things grow," right? And so if a church is healthy, its size, its budget, its influence and its reach would be continually growing. Therefore there must be something wrong with churches—and their leaders—when they aren't experiencing these things.

That's what the world says. But is that what Jesus says?

The Churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia: Having Nothing, Yet Possessing Everything

- The cities of Smyrna and Philadelphia were among the least significant cities of those listed, and their churches were likely the smallest—and the least influential.
- And yet these are the *only* churches that Jesus has nothing negative to say about. In other words, **these two small churches serve as the model of all of God's churches.**
- So why is Jesus so pleased with these churches?
 - o Both of these churches, it is clear, were experiencing persecution from the hands of the Jewish people. In both letters, there is mention of the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9)—a reference to how far God's chosen people had fallen since rejecting Christ.
 - o But in the midst of their persecution, both churches were finding strength in Jesus.
 - Smyrna, though materially impoverished and undergoing severe affliction were "spiritually rich" because of their faith (2:9).
 - And Philadelphia, though having little physical strength, have remained spiritually strong, not denying their faith in Jesus (3:8).
 - Though for both more afflictions would come—especially for Smyrna, some of whom may be killed for their faith (2:10)—Jesus promises to them ultimate victory (2:10 and 3:12).

"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." (Rev. 3:12 NIV)

Lesson: "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Two Additional Issues

1. The Warning to the Church at Sardis (3:5).

- Jesus gives a very stern warning to the Church at Sardis:

*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.** (Rev. 3:5 NIV)*

- Could this mean that someone can be “blotted out” of the book of life, thus losing their salvation? Rev. 13:8 and 17:8 seem to indicate that if someone is in the book of life, they will not do what causes them to fail.²
- It may be that some people in Sardis appear to be saved, but are not really, and this is the warning that Jesus is giving here.

These people left our churches, but they never really belonged with us; otherwise they would have stayed with us. When they left, it proved that they did not belong with us. (1 John 2:19 NLT)

2. A Hint of the Rapture? (3:10)

- Is there also an indication in the letter to the church at Philadelphia of the “rapture”—that the faithful may not have to experience the time of hardship that will come upon the world?

*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.** (Rev. 3:10 NIV)*

² John Piper writes, “Being in the book keeps you from doing what would get you erased from the book if you did it.” See his commentary on this verse at <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-i-be-blotted-from-the-book-of-life>

Final Thought

What makes a church?

1. Revelation 2-3 shows us that **Jesus takes his church seriously**. And if we as a church do not do what He wants us to do, there are serious ramifications.
2. So the question needs to be asked, **“If Jesus were writing a letter to Friends Church today, what would he praise us for? What would he criticize us for?”**
 - It is obvious to me that we have some of the most loving, kind and gracious people at Friends Church. Friends Church loves one another and Friends Church loves God. That would be commended.
 - But I’ll be honest—these questions keep me up at night:
 - We love others yes, but are we also valuing truth and doctrine enough?
 - How well are we looking to Jesus—and to His Word—to measure our “success”?
 - How strongly are we resisting compromise to the values of world around us?
3. It’s important to realize, though, that the church is made up of individuals, and though we leaders carry a special burden for how Jesus views our church, these are questions all of us need to ask of ourselves as members of the church.
4. In other words, **if Jesus were to write each of us, individually, a letter, what would he say to us?** That’s something only you can answer.

Don’t forget to email questions!
questions@friends.church

Homework for next week: Read Revelation 4-5 at least twice.

Questions for Group Discussion

1. As you think about our church perhaps having a literal “angel” over it, what thoughts come to mind? Does it fascinate you? Frighten you? Seem like a stretch to you? Why do you think what you think?
2. Read the letter to the Church at Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17). Though this church had a strong commitment to Jesus, they tolerated false teaching which Jesus comes out strongly against. What does that teach us about the importance of the teaching of God’s Word in the church? What does that say to us individually about how important it is to be students of God’s Word? How do you personally study the Word of God to be able to discern truth from error?
3. As we saw, the church in Ephesus had truth—but it did it at the cost of love. Why do you think that there is a pattern among God’s churches that those who take the teaching of the truth the strongest can end up being the most unloving? How do we guard against that ourselves?
4. Read the letter to the Church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22).
 - a. What stands out to you the most about what Jesus says here?
 - b. How can a church “forget” Jesus (Revelation 3:20)? How do we guard against that in our churches?
 - c. Jesus says in Revelation 3:19, “Those that I love I rebuke and discipline.” How can *rebuke* and *discipline* be a sign of Jesus’ love? What might that mean for those of us who are parents and grandparents?
5. If Jesus were to write a letter to Friends Church today, what do you think He would say? What would He praise us for? What would He criticize us for?
6. If Jesus were to write a letter to *you* today, what do you think He would say? What would He praise you for? What would He say needs improvement in your life?