

The Book of Revelation
Study Notes: 3

The Seven Letters to the Seven churches

- **Location:** Provincial Asia, forming a rough circle
- **Sender:** Glorified Christ (not the Jesus of the gospels)
- **Recipients:** the “angel” of the church, and the churches
- **Structure:** A basic pattern, but with variation with each church:
 - **Introduction**, “The One who...”, “He who...” **Commendation**, “I know...”
 - **Concern**, “I have this against you...” **Call to Repentance**, “repent”
 - **Call to Discernment**, “He who has an ear” **Promise**, “to him who overcomes”

Revelation 2:1-7, Letter to the Church in Ephesus

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ² 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³ and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ⁴ ***'But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*** ⁵ 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent. ⁶ 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. ***To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'***

Ephesus, capital & port city of the province of Asia, now western Turkey. Home to the temple Artemis and Anatolian goddess Cybele promoting a fertility cult, and female priest prostitution.

- See Acts 18-19, for Paul’s ministry in Ephesus.
- Tradition has it that the apostle John and Mary, mother of Jesus lived in Ephesus.

Introduction: The abiding Christ, who never leaves us or forsakes us

- **Sender:** *The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*
- **Antecedent:** **Revelation 1:12-13** *And...I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man, v. 1:16, in His right hand He held seven stars...*
- **Note:** The lampstands, churches, the stars “angels” of the seven churches (Rev 1:20).

Commendation: Staunch Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

- The church has remained steadfast and persevered (see vv. 2, 3). The church has tested false apostles (see 1 John 4:1: *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits*).

Concern: Loveless Abandon

- *But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*
- A deliberate contrast with Jesus who “walks among the seven golden lampstands” and with the church, which has “left” her first love. (see 2 Timothy 2:13)

Call to Repentance:

- **Remember** from where you have fallen, and **repent** and do the deeds you did at first.
- **Point:** Right actions and deeds do not of themselves guarantee a loving relationship with God. We must love God with all our heart first, before we show it in other ways.

Call to Discernment: Both Individual & Corporate (v.7)

Promise to the Church:

- *To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.'* Some believe this is a reference to the cross.
- To “overcome” implies that living for Jesus is a struggle in this “evil age”.
- **Paradise**, the place of intimate communion and “**the tree of life**” ensuring eternal life.

Important: Note Trinitarian presence; Son (v. 1), Spirit (v. 7a), God [the Father, (v. 7b)].

Revelation 2:8-11, To the Church in Smyrna

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: **The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:** ⁹ *'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.* ¹⁰ **'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.** ¹¹ *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.*

Smyrna: myrrh, a bitter herb, competed with Ephesus to be the first of the cities of Asia.

- Tertullian believed the church at Smyrna was founded by Paul (see Acts 19:8-10).
- Polycarp, John's disciple was burned alive at Smyrna in AD 153/55.

Introduction: The triumphant Christ who conquers death and promises resurrection

- **Sender:** *The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life,*
- **Antecedent: Revelation 1:17-18:** *Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,* ¹⁸ *and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore.*
- **Note:** no mention of Jesus' incarnation, ministry, or crucifixion, focus on his victory.

Commendation: The “Rich” Persecuted Church

- *I know your tribulation and your poverty... 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer.*
- *Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days.*
- Suffering for “ten days” conveys severity, intensity, but ultimately of limited duration.

Concern, Call to Repentance, none given

Promise:

- *Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.* (see James 1:12).
- “Crown,” a victor's wreath awarded for having persevered under persecution.
- He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death, Hell (Rev 20:14; 21:8).

Revelation 2:12-17, To the Church in Pergamum

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: ¹³ 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality. ¹⁵ 'Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ 'Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. ¹⁷ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.

Pergamum: the political center of Asia, where all the rulings were made that affected the whole of Asia Minor." Known as temple keepers of Asia, Pergamum had a number of altars to the healing god Asclepius and roman emperors.

- Pergamum, the Altar of Zeus, believed to be the "throne of Satan" referenced in v. 13.
- **Antipas**, bishop of Pergamum, ordained by the Apostle John. The governor ordered Antipas to offer a sacrifice to a statue of the Roman emperor. Antipas refused and was roasted alive on the Altar of Zeus in AD 92.

Introduction: The Warring Christ

- **Sender:** *The One who has the sharp two-edged sword*
- **Antecedent:** **Revelation 1:16** *and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword;*

Commendation: Steadfast Under Severe Persecution

- V. 13, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one...
- A German archeological expedition discovered the "Altar of Zeus" in the 1870s. "Throne of Satan" on display in Berlin's *Pergamon Museum* in 1930. The Altar of Zeus inspired Adolf Hitler, and the Nazis in the architectural design for the Third Reich.

Concern: Laxity over Heresy and False Doctrine

- Teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit *acts of immorality*. Also, the triumphalist *teaching of the Nicolaitans*.

Call to Repentance: In Light of Imminent "War"

- *Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.*

Promise:

- To receive *hidden manna, a white stone, a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.*
- "Manna," promised to those who abstain from food sacrificed to idols.
- A "white stone" eschatological acquittal, a token of admission of Christian membership. Some have seen it as a divine amulet to ward off evil.
- A "new name" symbolizing the victor's entry into new life in Christ (Is. 62:2; 65:15)

Revelation 2:18 – 29, The Church in Thyatira

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: **The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:** ¹⁹ 'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. ²⁰ 'But I have this against you, **that you tolerate the woman Jezebel...who teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols.** ²¹ **'And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality.** ²² **'Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds...** ²⁴ 'But I say to you, the rest wh... do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan...- I place no other burden on you... ²⁶ **'And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations;** ²⁷ **and he shall rule them with a rod of iron,** as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; ²⁸ and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Thyatira: The principal deity of the city was Apollo, however, there was also a stone outside the walls, dedicated to *Sambatha*, a sibyl believed to be of Chaldean, Jewish, or Persian origin.

- Thyatira was known for the trade guilds, unions, with their dedicated gods.
- Known for foundries which produced brass, copper-zinc, for coinage and military uses.
- Lydia, seller of purple was from Thyatira (Acts 16:14)

Introduction: The Holy and Intolerant Christ

- **Sender:** *Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, His feet are like burnished bronze*
- **Antecedent:** **Revelation 1:14-15** and His eyes were like a flame of fire; ¹⁵ and His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been caused to glow
- Christ's feet like "burnished bronze" echoing the foundries, but in an ominous way.

Commendation:

- I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first.

Concern: Rampant Immorality

- *You tolerate...Jezebel...she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols* (OT Jezebel, 1 Kings 16; 21)
- *Concerning, the deep things of Satan,* probably associated with the trade guilds, which expected members to engage in its syncretistic practices and feasts.

Call to Repentance:

- *And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality.* ²² *'Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds...*

Promise, "to him who overcomes"

- *I will give authority over the nations;* ²⁷ *and he shall rule them with a rod of iron;*
- *and I will give him the morning star,* authority over the nations," promising the day when gentile (nation) guilds, will not mandate behavior, Christ ethic will reign supreme.
- "Rule with rod of iron," symbolizing uncompromising power, authority.
- "Moring star," the sun, sovereignty, which Christ embodies as the true morning star.

Revelation 3:1-6, To the Church in Sardis

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: **He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this:** 'I know your deeds, that **you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.** ² **'Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.** ³ 'Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. ⁴ 'But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. ⁵ 'He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels. ⁶ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Sardis: Artemis was the main goddess of the city and the temple dedicated to her in Sardis was one of the seven largest Greek temples (more than double the size of the Parthenon).

- The synagogue of Sardis is notable for its size and location.
- It is in the center of the urban center, instead of on the periphery as synagogues typically were, attesting to the clout the Jews enjoyed in the city.

Introduction: The Lord of the “Angels”

- **Sender:** *He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars*
- **Antecedent:** **Revelation 1:16** *And in His right hand He held seven stars;*

Commendation: To a Remnant within a Lifeless Church

- *But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy.*

Concern: The Church with a Deceptive Appearance

- *You have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.*
- Sardis was described as “dead” (3:1). It appeared to be alive – had “a reputation of being alive” – looked spiritually vibrant on the outside – but was spiritually lifeless.
- **Matthew 23:27:** Woe to you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

Call to Repentance:

- Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep *it, and repent.*

Promise:

- *He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, before His angels.*
- “White garments” pointing to garments worn when celebrating military victories.
- “Book of life” may point to the removal from the official synagogue register for any Jews that professed their faith in Christ, but the securing of their name in the heavenly book.

Revelation 3:7-13, To the Church in Philadelphia

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: **He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:** ⁸ 'I know your deeds. Behold, **I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.** ⁹ 'Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie-- behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you. ¹⁰ 'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth. ¹¹ 'I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown. ¹² 'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name. ¹³ 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Philadelphia: meaning, "Brotherly Love"

- Philadelphia was founded in 189 B.C. by Pergamum King Eumenes and given its name in honor of the love he had for his brother Attalus.
- The city was also sometimes referred to as "Little Athens" because of the pagan temples and other public buildings which adorned it.
- Philadelphia suffered from constant earthquakes, making life impossible within the city, forcing many to have to live outside its gates.

Introduction: Christ, the Custodian of Life and Death and Opportunity

- **Sender:** *He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens,*
- **Antecedent:** **Revelation 1:18** and *I have the keys of death and of Hades.*

Commendation:

- I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹ 'Behold, I will cause *those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie-- behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you.* ¹⁰ 'Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth.

Concern, Call to Repentance: None given

Promise:

- *Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.*
- *He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore...and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem...*
- The one who overcomes "will not go out anymore," alluding to the constant threat of earthquakes, which forced people to live "outside" the city walls.
- made "pillars", symbols of strength, stability in God's city, the New Jerusalem.

Revelation 3:14-22, To the Church in Laodicea

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: ¹⁵ 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ 'Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, ¹⁸ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. ¹⁹ 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. ²⁰ 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. ²¹ 'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. ²² 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Laodicea: Located in the Lycus River Valley together with Hierapolis and Colossae.

- Cicero, Roman orator, statesman, was governor of Asia, lived mostly in Laodicea.
- Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities of Rome. When Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in A.D. 60, they refused aid from Rome and rebuilt the city themselves.

Introduction:

- **Sender:** The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God,
- **Antecedent: Revelation 1:5** *From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the ruler of the kings of the earth.*
- **Note:** Jesus' presentation is consistent with his posture to the world. His appearance does not come from John's church vision, because he is not in the church (Rev 3:20).

Commendation: None given

Concern: Luke warmness and Self- sufficiency

- ¹⁵ 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. ¹⁶ 'So because you are **lukewarm**, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. ¹⁷ 'Because you say, "**I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing**," and you do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, naked.
- "lukewarm," probably meaning ineffective, insipid, rather than half-hearted.
- "You say, I am rich", pointing to their financial power and self-sufficiency.
- **Note:** The letter does not mention any issues the church faced. It offers no light on persecution, perhaps because in this case, the church had fully embraced the culture.

Call to Repentance:

- *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. ²⁰ 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.*
- "I stand at the door and knock" Christ stands at the door and knocks to be let in.

Promise to the church:

- ²¹ *'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*

Chiastic Structure of the Seven Letters?

- **Ephesus: Revelation 2:1:** *The One who holds seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: **emphasizing the need to have a loving relationship with Christ.***
 - **Smyrna: Revelation 2:8:** *The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this: **emphasizing the need to remain steadfast under tribulation.***
 - **Pergamum: Revelation 2:12:** *The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: **emphasizing the need to fight the spiritual battle of faith.***
 - **Thyatira: Revelation 2:18:** *The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, His feet are like burnished bronze, says this: **emphasizing the importance of moral holiness and doctrinal purity***
 - **Sardis: Revelation 3:1:** *He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars, says this: **emphasizing the peril of losing spiritual vitality.***
 - **Philadelphia: Revelation 3:7:** *He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this: **emphasizing the faithfulness of an obedient church to the mission.***
- **Laodicea: Revelation 3:14:** *The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: **emphasizing the peril of ousting Christ all together.***

Some Important Observations

- Revelation chapters 2-3 address the church as she finds herself at any one time and place and arguably, as she has found herself across her history.
- While the letters acknowledge the church's faithfulness, they also reveal deep spiritual problems. While there were many faithful, the penetrating power of society had blocked out the church's view of Christ to one degree or another.
- To many, the world seemed to be the only compelling reality. The church needed to refocus her mind on the real power of the universe, the glorified Christ!
- Christ addresses each church consistent with their actual ongoing circumstance.
- Note that with Ephesus, Christ walks among the candlesticks (the churches), but with Laodicea, Christ stands outside the church, ostracized!

Will the church remain faithful, or will she abandon Christ?