

REVELATION

The Kingdom Yet to Come



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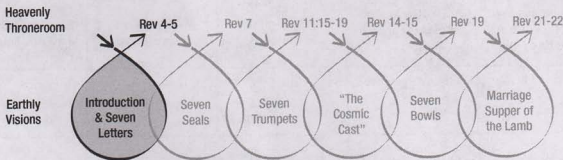
Session 2 – Questions

REVELATION

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Revelation 2-3:

Letters to the Seven Churches



A. Review the Context

In chapter 2, we turn from the glorious inaugural vision to our Lord's specific messages to the seven churches ("lampstands") in western Asia (now Turkey). These seven churches were all located along a major Roman route. Some believe that each church received the book of Revelation with only God's message to its particular community as an introduction. Others believe that each received the entire book, including all seven letters to the various Asian communities. Whoever carried these important letters would likely have sailed from Patmos to the ancient port city of Ephesus (the first recipient), and then traveled inland and north to Smyrna, circling clockwise through the rest of the seven communities (see map in Introduction). This path is the exact order in which the cities appear in Revelation 2-3. Today there is little left of these ancient communities, and Mass cannot be said in Ephesus today by Turkish law—bearing out the extent to which Ephesus has fallen (see Revelation 2:5). Although some scholars propose these letters were modeled after Roman imperial decrees, they are most like Old Testament prophetic exhortations (see Ezekiel 25–32 or Jeremiah 29), which appeal to the emotions of the listeners.

The aim of the letters is to stir the persecuted Christians to fidelity and perseverance in trial, while also challenging their failures and commending their virtues. Each letter follows a seven-part pattern: (1) the angel (bishop) of the church is addressed, (2) a description of Christ is given, (3) a commendation is given if merited, (4) a challenge is offered if repentance is needed, (5) a consequence is given should God's message go unheeded, (6) a challenge to "hear" is offered, and (7) a promise is given to the one who conquers his spiritual foes and "endures to the end."

For each letter, fill out the boxes in the chart that follows. A completed version of the chart with all churches together is included in the responses to this lesson.

B. Read the Story

Now carefully read Revelation 2-3. Ask yourself the questions: *Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?*

As always, pray before you read.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering the following questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you don't understand something, make a note to bring it up in the discussion.

To the Church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

Description of Jesus (i.e., "These are the words of..."):	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions:	Promise(s) to those who are faithful:

We may know more about the ancient Church at Ephesus than any other community. We have information from Paul's missionary journeys to Ephesus in Acts 18-20, his epistle to the Ephesians, and finally his two letters to the Ephesians' young pastor (1 & 2 Timothy). We also have a letter St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Ephesian church on the way to his martyrdom in Rome (around AD 107). This community was renowned for its "orthodoxy" but has obviously lost some of the love which characterized their early relationship with the Lord.

1. Think about your relationship with Jesus in terms of a romance. What are some things one might do to "rekindle" one's love relationship with God?

To the Church in Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)

Description of Jesus (i.e., "These are the words of..."):	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions:	Promise(s) to those who are faithful:

Smyrna (the present-day city of Izmir) was famous in Asia Minor for its dedication to emperor worship. Christians were persecuted and martyred for not participating in this devotion. Smyrna was a very prosperous city at the time. It had a large population of Jews who were hostile to Christianity (Judaism as a religion was officially recognized by Rome).

2. a. What encouraging words did Jesus speak to the persecuted Christians in Smyrna?

- b. How can his words strengthen your faithfulness to the Gospel today?

To the Church in Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17)

Description of Jesus (i.e., "These are the words of...")	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions	Promise(s) to those who are faithful

Pergamum (Gk. "citadel") was another center of pagan and emperor worship. It stands on a high hill and was once the capital of Asia. The great throne of Zeus there may have been the throne of Satan mentioned in verse 13. Like the Christians in Smyrna, those in Pergamum may have faced physical persecution. But here the greatest danger seems to be the insidious lure of false teaching. Balaam deceived Israel with his counsel; the Nicolaitans seduced Israel to idolatry.

3. Why do you think Jesus commands the entire Church to repent, even though only some of her members are embracing false teachings?

To the Church in Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)

Description of Jesus (i.e., "These are the words of...")	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions:	Promise(s) to those who are faithful:

Thyatira was home to many trade guilds, and membership in these guilds was essential to the livelihood of those who wanted to trade. However, the pagan religious affiliations of these guilds posed moral dilemmas (e.g., sexual immorality and feasting associated with idolatry) to the Christians who belonged to them.

4. a. Jesus charges the community in Thyatira with "adultery," or being unfaithful to him by engaging in the idolatrous practices common to their city. What are some ways we might be tempted to compromise with sinful practices in our culture in order to succeed or be accepted?

- b. What does this teach us about personal compromises in our own spiritual lives?

To the Church in Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)

Description of Jesus (e.g., "These are the words of...");	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions:	Promise(s) to those who are faithful:

Sardis was a commercial city whose seemingly impregnable stronghold had twice been taken by stealth: first by Cyrus and later by Antiochus the Great. The nominally Christian community of John's time was spiritually dead. They were called Christians, but little in their behavior showed that Jesus was alive and well in their lives and relationships.

5. Jesus calls on this spiritually complacent community to wake up before he comes "like a thief," the way conquerors had come in the past.
- Read the message to Sardis. To what extent does the Church in America fit this picture?
 - Do you see any evidence that we are "waking up"? What positive events happening in the Church seem to be reversing this picture?

To the Church in Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)

Description of Jesus (i.e., "These are the words of... [who?]...");	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions:	Promise(s) to those who are faithful:

Of the seven churches mentioned, Philadelphia and Smyrna receive nothing but praise. In both cases, they face stiff opposition from Jews who would “shut the door” of the kingdom to them. That Jesus “has the key of David”—authority over God’s kingdom (the “new Jerusalem”)—and that he has set an open door before them “which no one shall be able to shut” would be a great comfort to those being persecuted.

6. The Christians in Philadelphia “have but little power” but have kept Jesus’ words and not denied him. Many Catholics are discouraged today by negative events in and out of the Church that we have little power to change. What can we learn from Jesus’ words to the Philadelphians about encouraging the discouraged?

To the Church in Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)

Description of Jesus (i.e., “These are the words of...”):	Praise/Recognition given to the church for:	Rebuke(s) given to the church for:	Warnings and instructions:	Promise(s) to those who are faithful:

The people of Laodicea were known for their financial wealth, their textile industry, and their famous eye salve. They were legendary for their self-reliance, which was clear when the city was destroyed by a great earthquake in AD 60. Rather than depend upon support from the Roman Empire, they rebuilt their entire city on their own, from their own wealth, with no help from Rome.

7. a. How does this description of Laodicea enrich your understanding of Jesus’ words in verses 17-18?
- b. How do these words of Jesus apply to us today?

Laodicea: “neither cold nor hot”

Laodicea lies between two other cities, Colossae and Hierapolis. The city of Colossae was located at the base of a narrow valley and enjoyed the cool mountain streams from the snowy peaks above it, while Hierapolis was the local hot spot. Its steamy mineral springs would flow out of the city, eventually cascading off the cliffs overlooking Laodicea. Both cities were considered centers of healing. One could either be refreshed by the cool, clean waters of Colossae or healed by soaking in the mineral baths of Hierapolis. Unfortunately, by the time the hot water cascaded off the cliffs to settle around Laodicea, it had become lukewarm, putrid, and good for neither refreshment nor healing.

8. In Revelation 3:14, Jesus is called “the Amen.” Read *Catechism* Nos. 1061-1065.
- What does this term mean?
 - What does it mean that Jesus is the “Amen” of God?
 - What does it mean in our lives when we say “amen” to all that Christ is and provides?

D. Application

This question will help you apply one of the key themes of the lesson to your life. After meditating on it, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

- As you have studied Christ’s messages to the ancient churches of Asia, it is clear that we face many of the same challenges and pitfalls today. Imagine Jesus composing a simple letter to your parish. What do you imagine would be his commendations and challenges to your faith community? What are you doing or can you do to help your community to grow in faith and holiness?

Dear Lord,

Session 2 Talk Notes

Revelation 2-3 • Letters to the Seven Churches

A. Overview

1. Seven churches
2. Formula of the seven letters:
 - a. Introduction of speaker
 - b. Jesus knows their situation
 - c. Evaluation of congregation
 - i. Commendation
 - ii. Chastisement
 - d. Hear what the Spirit says
 - i. Hear = *shema* in Hebrew
 - ii. Deuteronomy 6:4 — “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord”
 - iii. Hearing means doing
3. Use of phrases and images from local culture

B. Ephesus (Revelation 2:1–7; see also Acts, Ephesians)

1. Orthodox in faith — did not compromise truth
2. Lost their first love
3. Called to do the works they did at first
 - a. Love is an action
 - b. Historical reference — dredging of the River Cayster in AD 64
4. Hate the Nicolaitans (see Acts 6)

C. Smyrna (Revelation 2:8–11)

1. Emperor worship
2. Rich city, poor Christians
3. No vice or rebuke given
4. Reward is the crown of life (crown of Smyrna = mountain)

5. Tribulation for ten days
 - a. Daniel 1 — Hebrew boys tested for ten days
 - b. Ten = a relatively short period
6. Second death = hell (see Rev. 20:14–15)

D. Pergamum (Revelation 2:12–17)

1. City of many temples, emperor worship
2. Snake is symbol of city (Asclepius = Greek god of medicine)
3. Hold fast to name, faith
4. Reward is hidden manna
5. “Satan’s throne”
 - a. Pergamum hill resembles a giant throne
 - b. Center of occult, emperor worship
6. Rebukes
 - a. Balaam, teacher of Balak (see Numbers 25)
 - b. Nicolaitans (Gk. *nicao* = “overcome”)
 - c. Christ encouraging the Church to overcome
 - d. See also Numbers 22, 31

E. Thyatira (Revelation 2:18–29)

1. Known for trade guilds
 - a. Lydia (Acts 15)
 - b. Each guild had a god — faithfulness to God would affect livelihood
2. Message: be intolerant of false teaching and immorality
3. Morning star = Jesus (22:16)

F. Sardis (Revelation 3:1–6)

1. Wealth and fame — secularized
2. Impregnable city caught by surprise attacks: wake up!
3. White garments = righteous deeds of the saints (19:8), putting on Christ (Galatians 3:27)

G. Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7–13)

1. Pillars of the Church
 - a. City rebuilt with imperial funds after earthquake
 - b. Jesus offers stability

H. Laodicea (Revelation 3:14–22)

1. Wealthy, known for banking, medicine (eye salve), textiles (rare wool)
2. Used own funds to rebuild after earthquake
3. Greedy cultural Christians—lukewarm
 - a. Colossae: refreshing icy streams
 - b. Hierapolis: healing mineral springs
 - c. Laodicea: lukewarm, good for nothing
4. Christ's prescription for weakness
 - a. Refined gold for poverty (1 Peter 1:6–9)
 - b. White garments for nakedness (Genesis 3:7)
 - c. Salve for blindness (John 9)
5. Jesus knocks at the door — offers to share the Eucharist

I. Conclusion

1. Return in the Spirit on the Lord's Day — Eucharist
2. Repentance
3. Challenge our own lives
4. Conversion (*Catechism* Nos. 1427–1429) — Adoration