

# LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

## Revelation 1-3

Today we begin a series of sermons based on the book of Revelation. Our lessons for each Sunday are based on a three year cycle. We are in the third year where most of the Gospel lessons come from Luke. During the six Sundays after Easter the epistle lessons are all from Revelation.

Revelation can invoke all kinds of emotions for us. When a time of crisis comes like the war in Ukraine, people point out that Revelation is coming true and the world is coming to an end. Many have used Revelation to make predictions about when the world will end and how we can be on top on that situation. The result is all kind of crazy ideas and weird thoughts. No wonder Martin Luther called Revelation, “The refuge of heretics.”

Before we get into the heart of Revelation, we will look today at the first three chapters focusing on how it is a letter that was sent out to seven churches. In those churches we can see examples of us today.

John, the disciple of Jesus, wrote Revelation. This is the same man who wrote the Gospel of John and three letters in the New Testament. He tells us that he was exiled on the island of Patmos, off the coast of Turkey, when the “Revelation” came to him. He shares it with seven young churches in Turkey, what was known in those days as “Asia Minor.” The seven churches are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. To each of the seven, he has a message. Each message has six parts—Commission, Identity of Jesus, Recognition, Criticism, Admonition, and Encouragement. These parts are often identified by these phrases: “To the angel” (Commission), “These are the words” (Identity of Jesus), “I know” (Recognition), “Yet” (Criticism), words of command (Admonition), and “He who has ears” (Encouragement).

The first church is Ephesus. Ephesus, the same town that Paul wrote to in the book of Ephesians, was at that time an important seaport. It was the fourth largest city in the Romans Empire after Rome, Alexandria, Egypt, and Antioch of Syria. Remember each church receives this six-fold message: Commission, Identity of Jesus, Recognition, Criticism. Admonition, and Encouragement.

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” (Jesus identified)

Seven is the number of God. He creates the world in seven days. He appears on Mount Sinai with a voice that sounds like seven voices. So the seven stars and seven lampstands identify Jesus as God.

“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. You have persevered and have endured hardships for My name, and have not grown weary.” (Recognition)

As now there were a lot of false prophets misleading people.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.” (Criticism)

“Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” (Admonition)

In chapter one the lampstand symbolizes the church’s connection to God.

John adds this special note—“But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitians, which I also hate.”

We are not sure who the “Nicolaitians” were. Nicolas is identified in Acts 6 as one of the seven deacons, like Stephen, chosen by the church, but it is doubtful that this is the leader of the Nicolaitians.

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” (Encouragement)

The “tree of life” takes us back to the Garden of Eden. When humans sinned, they were cut off from this. Revelation ends with the followers of Jesus eating from that tree.

Smyrna is the next city. It also was on the coast. It is the modern city of Izmir, a city ravaged not too long ago by an earthquake, just as the area faced such destruction in ancient times.

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of Him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” (Jesus identified)

Jesus is identified again as God, who is the first and last.

“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (Recognition)

We do not know the specifics of their poverty, but many who became Christian risked losing their jobs. The Jews were the first to persecute Christians, but these “Jews” and the “synagogue of Satan” could refer to all who opposed the Christians, not just overtly, but often subtly.

“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.”

Note there is no Criticism here. They have it bad enough that John only props them up. “Ten days” is not talking about an exact time; just that it will be temporary.

“Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”  
(Admonition)

These words are traditionally linked to confirmation where we make the pledge to be faithful unto death. The victors crown is reflected in these words by Paul in 1 Timothy:

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.” (Encouragement).

The second death is spoken of at the end of Revelation. It is eternal damnation, not the death that we probably will face when our hearts stops beating.

The next church is Pergamum. Like Ephesus and Sardis it is located on the coast. It was known for its great temple of Zeus, the chief Greek god and its medical center.

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” (Jesus identified)

St. Paul speaks in Ephesians of the God’s Word being the “sword of the spirit.” Hebrews 4:12 says that God Word is a sword “sharper than any double-edged sword; it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” In Revelation 19 Jesus is the rider on the white horse whose sword comes from His mouth to defeat Satan and his angels.

“I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to My name. You did not renounce your faith in Me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.” (Recognition)

All we know about Antipas is that he was martyred in Pergamum.

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitians.” (Criticism)

Balak was the king of Moab who asked Balaam, a seer to put a curse on the Israelites as they approached the promised land near the end of the Exodus. But God spoke through Balaam’s donkey and got Balaam to speak blessing on Israel. This Old Testament story is used to describe those who tried to stop God’s people.

“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” (Admonition)

“Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.” (Encouragement)

Manna is what fed the people of Israel in the wilderness. Carving into a white stone makes it permanent.

The fourth church is Thyatira. It is an inland city, but along the trade routes. It was known for its fine clothing and artisans.

“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.” (Jesus identified)

This imagery from the prophet Daniel shows that Jesus is God.

“I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.” (Recognition)

“Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” (Criticism)

Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab, who is called by I Kings the worst of all the kings of Israel. He is the prophet Elijah’s great nemesis. Or perhaps I should say Jezebel. She was from Phoenician and brought into Israel a particularly pernicious form of Baal worship. She represents how evil tempts people.

In Acts 15 the early church had a great council. They decided that Gentiles could become Christian without become Jews, but they asked that they refrain from “sexual immorality and eating of meat offered to idols.” These issues led people back into paganism, just as in this world today we are tempted to “fit in” and fall away from God.

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets, ‘I will not impose any other burden on you, except to hold on to what you have until I come.’ (Admonition)

“To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations— that one ‘will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from My Father. I will also give that one the morning star. “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”  
(Encouragement)

Psalm 2 is about God’s chosen one, the Messiah. He is given the iron scepter to smash enemies like pottery. They had only recently in the Psalmist time learned how to refine and shape iron, so it was stronger than older weapons. Christ’s Church is given His power—the power to forgive.

The morning star is planet Venus, the brightest light in the sky after the Sun and moon. It is a symbol of Jesus, the Messiah, the first light before greater light comes.

The fifth city is Sardis. Sardis was the capitol of a great kingdom that rivaled Persia.

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” (Jesus identified)

The number seven marks this as being from God.

“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” (Recognition)

“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. (Criticism)

“Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.”  
(Admonition)

Jesus does talk about His return being like a thief in the night.

“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.”

“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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Encouragement)

The white dress is a symbol of how we are declared right with God through Jesus. We are clothed with His righteousness. The “book of life” comes from the prophet Daniel. It reminds us as Jesus said in John 10 that “nothing can snatch them out of My hand.”

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open.” (Jesus identified)

In the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel we sing, “O come, Thou key of David come and open wide our heavenly home.”

“I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept My word and have not denied My name.”  
(Recognition)

I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 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.

Like with Smyrna there is no criticism. Instead there is a promise about their enemies. Again the synagogue of Satan is like what is mentioned about Smyrna.

“I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.”  
(Command)

“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. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”  
(Encouragement)

The ruins of Philadelphia have the remains of huge pillars. The New Jerusalem is spoken about in chapter 20. Philadelphia was actually a new town, so this fits in with what John writes. Newness symbolizes the new life we have in Jesus.

The seventh and final city mentioned is Laodicea.

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:” (Commission)

“These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.”  
(Jesus identified)

Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians that in Jesus there is no “yes” and “no” because He is the “Amen” to God’s promises.

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 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.” (Criticism)

Like with Philadelphia excavation of Laodicea helps us to understand what is written. The city had three sources of water—cold river water from the mountain, hot spring water for healing, and vapid water which was collected in ceramic pipes that got clogged up with minerals. John also hits on three things the city was known for—wealth, eye salve, and clothing—thus he says they will become: poor, blind, and naked.” This is the harshest criticism of all the seven churches. Note they are being held to account for being “lukewarm,” not so much for doing evil, but failing to do what they should do. Does that sound like us?

“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.” (Admonition)

Note again the three things Laodicea was known for.

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 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.”

In the midst of the harsh criticism, John tells us why Jesus is so harsh—because He loves us. One of the most famous pictures of Jesus is Him knocking at the door. Or to use a more contemporary phrase—“How is Jesus messing with you?”

“To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on My throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with My Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Encouragement)

Sitting on throne, like we speak of Jesus sitting on the right hand of the Father, does not mean sitting around, but means exercising authority.

In summary we see something for us today from John’s messages to each of the seven churches:

The lesson in the letter to **Ephesus** teaches that truth and love must go hand-in-hand. A church that upholds doctrinal purity at the expense of showing love is just as flawed as a church that upholds congregational harmony at the expense of truthful teachings. Instead, Jesus reveals that a church fashioned in His image must teach God’s Truth in love.

Like the church in **Smyrna**, Christians are persecuted worldwide in obvious and insidious ways. This letter warns all Christians that although we may suffer greatly, the length of tribulation will be short compared to the promise of eternal life.

Like the Christians in **Pergamum**, it’s easy to normalize the non-Christian behavior of those around us and allow that behavior to dilute our values. But the Bible urges us to “not conform to the pattern of this world” but be transformed by the renewal of our mind in accordance with God’s Word.

Just as some in **Thyatira**'s church were led astray by a false prophet, Christians today fall prey to cult leaders, occult practices, and other false teachings. To share in Christ's victory, we are to avoid these "so-called deep secrets" of Satan and hold firm to Christ's teachings.

Today, Christians can fall into the trap that ensnared the church in **Sardis** if we merely go through the motions of practicing our faith without really feeding our spirit. We can avoid becoming "the living dead" by engaging in our faith through Bible study, prayer, and fellowship.

The message to **Philadelphia** shows us the blessings that come when we maintain our faith despite life's tribulations. In fact, those who persevere despite weaknesses will stand strong as pillars in Heaven.

Like the church in **Laodicea**, it's easy to become complacent in our faith during times of abundance. Christ warns us in this revelation that He will "spit out" lukewarm disciples. Instead, Jesus urges us to keep seeking the Lord's face even after His hand has bestowed riches in our lives.

God warns us, but the main point through all of this is—**He is in control!**