

Jesus and the Seven Churches

September 20, 2026

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Revelation 2–3

Session Outline

1. Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum (Revelation 2:1-17)
2. Thyatira and Sardis (Revelation 2:18–Revelation 3:6)
3. Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 3:7–22)

Theological Theme

Jesus's letters to the seven churches of ancient Asia offered commendation and criticism we can learn from today.

Call to Action

Like the early church, we are called to ongoing faithfulness to Jesus.

Jesus and the Seven Churches

Introduction

In 1860, Miss Grace Bedell wrote a very important letter. She was eleven, and the letter in question was addressed to presidential hopeful Abraham Lincoln. In the charming way that only children can manage, she wrote of her family, hoped Lincoln had a daughter who might write back to her (he had only sons), and gave him some thoughtful (and hilarious) advice: Grace recommended Lincoln grow “whiskers” to enhance his thin face and thus gain more votes.¹

To this prudent campaign advice, Lincoln responded and offered the following reply about the beard: “As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affection if I were to begin it now?”² The answer to Lincoln’s question was clearly a resounding no. He grew a rather famous beard after this, and many of us, when we call up images of Lincoln in our heads, see him with “whiskers.”

Throughout human history, many letters have prompted action (some even world changing). Lincoln’s choice to grow a beard didn’t quite change the world, but today, we’ll explore some letters that did. These letters found in Revelation are still useful, and still hold the power to change lives today, thousands of years after they were written.



Have you ever written a letter (or other type of message) that prompted some sort of action? What did you write and what happened?



Why can this type of communication be effective?

Session Summary

Jesus’s letters to the ancient churches in Asia still hold truths for us today. In these letters, Jesus commended and criticized, instructing the believers in areas they needed to correct their faith. In them, we can often see ourselves and find direction and encouragement.

1. Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum (Revelation 2:1-17)

These are the words of Jesus to His churches. In them, He both commended and corrected, giving feedback for these individual congregations that benefitted not only those particular bodies, but the church as a whole. Now, even thousands of years after these original letters were written, the issues they address are still relevant.

The church is not a building but a group of people, and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of individuals within the church body can either steer the congregation toward Christ or away from Him.

The letters, generally, follow something like this:³

- An address to the angel of the church
- A depiction of the risen Christ
- “I know” (most often, this is followed by commendation)
- “But I have this against you” (most often, this includes correction)
- “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7)
- A promise



What did Jesus commend the church in Ephesus for? What correction did He give?

Ephesus. Ephesus was a large and powerful city in the ancient Roman Empire, heavily devoted to Artemis worship. This fertility goddess (who they called “savior”) had a massive cult presence in the city (the temple for Artemis even functioning as a bank). You may recall Paul’s extended ministry there, as recorded in Acts (Acts 20:31). We also have Paul’s letter to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians).

The Ephesian church was praised for their hard work. They didn’t tolerate evil people and had tested false apostles and “found them to be liars” (v. 2). They hadn’t grown weary in their perseverance for Christ. But they’d lost their love for God and had failed to follow what Jesus called the greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-38). This does not mean they had lost their salvation (thankfully, this is not possible), but they were in serious need of change. “In these words, the faithful were promised spiritual rewards. The “tree of life” and the “paradise of God” refer to the new heavens and new earth (Revelation 22:2), a reward awaiting all believers.”⁴



What was the church in Smyrna doing well? What were they to correct?

Ear to Hear

Let anyone who has ears to hear listen echoes Jesus’s warning to his hearers at the end of the parable of the sower (Mt 13:9). Most likely the one who conquers refers to faithful and obedient believers. In this context, failure to be a victor means losing spiritual rewards, not losing salvation. Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden of Eden so they could not eat from the tree of life (Gn 3:22–24) and thereby live there forever in sin. The paradise of God is the new heavens and earth (Rv 22:2). The tree of life will be there.

Smyrna. Smyrna was a port city north of Ephesus. The large Jewish community there strongly opposed Christianity, which Jesus acknowledged. When the emperor, Domitian, rolled out the edict saying everyone must worship him, he exempted the Jews, who did not want this freedom to extend to the Christians.⁵

Unlike the other churches, those in Smyrna received only commendation from Christ. They suffered opposition from the Jews, who were slandering them. The description of the Jews in verse 9 doesn't mean they weren't of Jewish descent, but rather points to their uncircumcised hearts (Romans 2:28-29). Their spiritual warfare would continue with a short prison stay to test their faith, but the reward for endurance would be "the crown of life" (v. 10; James 1:12). The "second death" refers to the "lake of fire" in Revelation 20:14 (Revelation 20:10,15).⁶ But faithful believers will "never be harmed" by this (v.11).



What did Jesus commend Pergamum for? What notes of correction did He give?

Pergamum. The ancient city of Pergamum was about fifty miles north of Smyrna. Christians were harshly persecuted there for their "disloyal and unpatriotic" refusal to participate in Domitian's emperor worship.⁷ Jesus's note of "Satan's throne" (v. 13) was a reference to the centrality of emperor worship in their culture. This was a difficult place for believers to live (even worse than Smyrna). The "sharp double-edged sword" (v. 12) is also referenced in 1:16, symbolizing the Word of God's power to judge.

In His commendation, Jesus acknowledged the difficult environment these believers found themselves in and commended the people for holding onto their faith. They didn't even deny Him when a faithful believer, Antipas, was martyred. Yet, they allowed the Nicolaitans, heretics who taught idolatry and immorality⁸ embraced by their society, to place a stumbling block in front of them. Jesus called for their repentance. The "manna" referenced in verse 17 pointed to Jesus's care of the people. White stones were given victors in the athletic games of the ancient Greeks, allowing them to retire and might be in view with the closing reference to this church.⁹

2. Thyatira and Sardis (Revelation 2:18–Revelation 3:6)



What did Jesus commend Thyatira for? What notes for correction did He give?

Thyatira. Thyatira sat on the Lycus River, about thirty miles southeast of Pergamum. Its trade guilds were devoted to patron (little g) gods and goddesses, and a huge pressure existed there for Christians to participate

in a culturally acceptable lifestyle of idolatry. Thyatira, whose letter is featured in the middle of this set of letters, was the smallest city written to, but received the longest letter.

This is the only time in Revelation that Jesus is called “the Son of God” (v. 18). The imagery in verse 18 points us back to Revelation 1:14-15.¹⁰

The church was commended for their “love, faithfulness, service, and endurance” (v. 19). Jesus criticized these believers for partaking in the pagan culture that surrounded them. They were behaving in a sexually immoral manner and eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols (the New Testament warned against this). Jezebel is a callback to the evil queen of Israel in the time of the kings (1 Kings 16, 18, 19, 21). She, along with her husband Ahab, promoted idol worship and actively persecuted God’s church, leading the people down an unfaithful path. Her “children” (v. 23) referenced the called out unfaithful in the congregation. Just like the people in the days of Jezebel were called to repent, so were the people of Thyatira, though apparently not everyone was unfaithful (v. 24). The faithful will enjoy ruling with Christ at His second coming (Revelation 20:4,6).¹¹



What was Sardis doing well? What were they to correct?

Sardis. Sardis was one of the oldest cities in Asia Minor. The people there were obsessed with death and immortality, and worshiped Artemis.¹²

The people of Sardis received no commendation from Christ, only criticism. They were living, but spiritually dead. We aren’t saved by our works, but good works flow out of genuine faith. Yet, this was missing from the people of Sardis. They needed deep spiritual change, and this letter served as a wake-up call. They were to remember God’s blessings and earnestly repent. Some among their congregation were faithful, but their numbers were few (v. 4). The faithful were worthy of heaven and their names would be recorded in the book of life.



How might we be threatened to go the same way as the people of Sardis? How might we guard against this?

3. Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 3:7-22)



What does Jesus commend the church in Philadelphia for? What correction did He give?



What was Laodicea doing well? What should they correct?

Philadelphia. Philadelphia was about forty miles southeast of Sardis. After a devastating earthquake in AD 17, the people carefully planned for the future (and any earthquakes it held). Evidently, they also faced Jewish opposition similar to the church in Smyrna.¹³

Jesus is described here as Holy and true, almighty in authority and power. The “key of David” is a reference to Isaiah 22:22.

The believers in Philadelphia were praised for their faithful works. Even though they had little power, they were faithful. Whatever injustice they faced, Christ would make it right (v. 9). Scholars aren’t agreed on the meaning of “keep you from the hour of testing” (v. 10), this could mean that they would be removed before the time of tribulation begins (7:14), or that they will be protected within it. “Those who live on the earth” (v. 10) refer to non-believers.¹⁴

Laodicea. Laodicea was an ancient trade center famous for its textiles. Idol worship, Zeus especially, flourished in Laodicea. They also had a water problem. They didn’t have direct access to the cold water available in the mountains, or the nearby hot springs. They had to bring in their water, and when it arrived, it was lukewarm.¹⁵

Like their water, the faith of the Laodiceans was lukewarm. It was worthless and not genuine. Jesus wrote that He would spit them out (like you might a sip of lukewarm water). Their wealth lulled them into a false sense of security. They thought they didn’t need anything and didn’t realize that their need was actually great. They needed to repent and turn to true faith. Jesus had been metaphorically locked outside the door in Laodicea, but He was at the door, knocking and ready to enter again when they repented. He also promised that the faithful would one day reign with Christ.



Which of these churches stands out to you most? What are you encouraged or challenged by in their situation?

Conclusion

These age-old letters highlight age-old heart problems. The areas for correction that Jesus outlined are still areas where many individuals and church bodies need correction today. These letters remind us that the church and her people aren’t perfect, even when they have a lot going for them. Studying these letters opens a door for us to reflect: Where do we struggle similarly?

Just like Jesus wrote to the church in Laodicea, if we have locked Him out of our lives, Jesus hasn't given up on us. He's standing the door of our lives, knocking and wanting to come back in. All we must do is repent and open the door (3:20).

- ❓ In what ways does the modern church still display some aspects of faith Jesus commended in these letters?
- ❓ How do we see these types of challenges still present in the church today?
- ❓ How is God calling you to respond today based on these letters to His churches? If Jesus were to write you a letter, what might it say?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for the gift that Revelation is. Thank Him for the wisdom in the passages we studied today. Ask for His help as you reflect on what you learned and for discerning what might be in your "letter." Ask Him to show you where you need to make correction in your life, and for encouragement in the areas where you are living faithfully.

Memory Verse

"Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." —Revelation 2:7

Additional Resources

- *Be Victorious* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Revelation for You* by Tim Chester
- *Exalting Jesus in Revelation* by Daniel Akin



Historical Context of Revelation

Purpose

Much of the book of Revelation focuses on events at the end of the age (eschatology), more so than any other book in the Bible. But it also focuses on practical choices that believers and unbelievers must make in the course of their lives that have far-reaching consequences at the end.

Author

The traditional view holds that the author of Revelation is the apostle John, who wrote the Fourth Gospel and the three letters of John. Evidences for this view include the following. (1) The writer referred to himself as “John” (1:4, 9; 22:8). (2) He had personal relationships with the seven churches of Asia Minor (1:4, 11; 2–3). (3) His circumstances at the time of writing (1:9) matched those of John the apostle (who was placed in Asia Minor from about AD 70 to 100 by reliable historical sources from the second century AD). (4) The saturation of the book with Old Testament imagery and echoes implies a Jewish writer, like John, operating in overwhelmingly Gentile Asia Minor.

Setting

The initial audience that received the book of Revelation was a group of seven local churches in southwest Asia Minor (1:11; 2–3). Some of these congregations were experiencing persecution (2:9–10, 13), probably under the Roman emperor Domitian (ruled AD 81–96). Others had doctrinal and practical problems (2:6, 13–15, 20–23). Also behind these surface problems was the backdrop of unseen but powerful spiritual warfare (2:10, 14, 24; 3:9).

Special Features

The resurrected, glorified Jesus Christ revealed himself to the apostle John, who had been imprisoned “on the island called Patmos” (1:9). Christ’s twofold purpose was: (1) to “unveil” a spiritual diagnosis for seven of the churches in Asia Minor with which John was familiar (chaps. 2–3), and (2) to reveal to John a series of visions setting forth events and factors related to the end times (chaps. 4–22).

Extended Commentary

Revelation 2–3

The letters to the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea have a fairly consistent format. First, after designating the recipients, the risen Lord as Sender introduces and describes Himself using a portion of the visionary description of the glorious Son of man found in 1:9–20. There follows an “I know” section of either commendation or criticism. Next appears typically some form of exhortation. To those who received criticism, the usual exhortation was to repent. However, to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia, for whom the Lord had only praise, the exhortation was one of assurance (2:10; 3:10–11). Each letter concludes, though the order may vary, with both an exhortation to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” and a promise of reward to the “overcomer,” that is, the one who conquers by persevering in the cause of Christ.

The church at Ephesus (2:1–7) was told to return to its first love or else its lampstand would be removed out of its place, a judgment implying the death of the church, though not the individual loss of final salvation. The church at Smyrna was tenderly encouraged to be faithful unto death, while the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira were sternly warned to beware of false teaching and the immoral deeds that so often accompany erroneous theology.

The church at Sardis was told to wake up and complete its works of obedience. The church at Philadelphia was promised, in the face of persecution by the local synagogue, that faith in Jesus would assure access into the eternal kingdom. Christ alone has the key of David and has opened the heavenly door that no one else can shut. And the church at Laodicea was told to turn from its self-deception and repent of its lukewarmness.

These warnings and encouragements were sent to seven real churches. No doubt the fact that “seven” are referred to has some symbolic significance and may well mean that the seven churches represented many Christian communities in Asia Minor. However representative the seven churches may have been, they were nonetheless seven very real churches to whom John was known and for whom he was instructed by the Risen Lord to write these words of warning and hope.

Some commentators refer to the seven churches as seven epochs of world history, but there is not the slightest hint in the text that the seven churches are to be understood in such a way. In fact, it is only a very forced and erroneous reading of church history that can make the letters to the seven churches appear as prophecies regarding seven epochs of world history.

Again, there is absolutely no hint in the text that John intended for us to understand these seven letters in that way. Instead, it is abundantly clear that the letters were written to real congregations, engaged in the very real struggles of faith and perseverance in the midst of impending, and sometimes actual, persecution. God’s word to one situation clearly had relevance for other situations in the first century. It is therefore not surprising that we, too, may read these letters, and indeed the entirety of the Revelation, and hear the voice of God in them. Thus, we read Revelation in the same general way that we would read Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. That is, after doing our best to understand the historical situation of and the inspired message to the intended, first-century audience, we then seek, as a people who continue to stand under the authority of God’s Word, to apply the ancient message to our lives and situations today.¹⁶

References

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