

Love Community Baptist Church

Wednesday Night Virtual Bible Study

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Revelation – Chapter 2-3

OUTLINE

Theme of the Chapter: "Are your ears awake? Listen. Listen to the Wind Words, the Spirit blowing through the churches."

Each letter is a prophetic word from Jesus to the 7 churches (Chapter 2 and 3). They are given through the spirit. That spirit is inspiring John. Each letter follows a similar pattern, balancing and reproof.

- To the angel of the church in a given city, write:
- Jesus (depicted in glory, often in terms from 1:13-18) says:
- I know (in most instances offers some praise)
- But I have this against you (offers some reproof, where applicable)
- The one who has ears must pay attention to what the Spirit says
- Eschatological promise (eschatological is the study of end times)

Ephesus – had allowed paganism to grow in the city. Ephesus is also known for the worship of Artemis and the practice of magic. They also had the presence of false teachers.

Jesus affirms the Ephesians' positive actions: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, 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" (Revelation 2:2-3). The Ephesian church was a hard-working group of believers full of fortitude. Also to their credit, they were gate-keepers of the truth and did not compromise with evildoers, and they showed patient endurance in bearing up under hardship.

However, Jesus also notes their shortcoming: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love" (Revelation 2:4). They were hard-working, but they no longer had the same passion for Christ as when they first believed. Their work was no longer motivated by love.

Jesus called the Ephesians to repent: "Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:5). In this case, the corrective was to remember the heights of their former love, repent (change their mind about their current status), and return to their previous way of doing things. It was time for revival in the church.

Jesus warns His church of impending judgment if they did not repent: "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Revelation 2:5b). In other words, their punishment would be the disbanding or destruction of the Ephesian church. The light in Ephesus would go out.

Jesus adds another commendation concerning doctrinal purity: "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Revelation 2:6). We don't know much about the Nicolaitans and their doctrine, except that it was heretical. Irenaeus, an early church father in Lyons

(modern-day France), wrote that the Nicolaitans promoted fornication and a compromising position on eating food sacrificed to idols, leading many into an unrestrained, carnal lifestyle.

Jesus then promises a blessing to those who heed the word: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). The “tree of life” and the “paradise of God” refer to the new heavens and new earth, discussed in Revelation 21–22. Those who conquer, or the “overcomers,” are simply believers (1 John 5:4-5). The Ephesian believers could look forward to the future glory of eternity with the Lord.

Like the Ephesian church, we can easily fall prey to a cold, mechanical observance of religion. Like the Ephesians, many tend to focus solely on doctrinal purity and hard work, to the exclusion of true love for Christ. As this letter shows, no amount of zeal for the truth or moral rectitude can replace a heart full of love for Jesus (see John 14:21, 23; 1 Corinthians 16:22).

Smyrna – impoverished yet rich, persecuted by those who claim to be Jews but are not, and will, like Jesus, find life in death. Some of the local Jewish community were collaborating with local officials to repress the Christian minority. Smyrna was facing persecution and martyrdom and God is calling them to be faithful even unto death.

The message was from the Lord Jesus Christ: “These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again” (Revelation 2:8). The identity of the first and the last and the resurrected one could only be Jesus Christ (see Revelation 22:13).

Jesus starts by acknowledging their trials: “I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9). In their physical poverty, however, the church of Smyrna was “rich”; that is, they had spiritual wealth that no one could take away (Matthew 6:20).

As for the identity of the “synagogue of Satan,” there are a couple of views. One is that this was a group of Gentiles who called themselves “Jews” (i.e., the chosen people of God). Instead of following Judaism, however, these self-proclaimed “people of God” worshiped the Roman emperor and spoke out against the Christians in Smyrna.

Another view is that the “synagogue of Satan” was a group of physical Jews who followed tradition and the Mosaic Law yet in reality did not know God. They were “not” Jews in the sense that they did not have the faith of their father Abraham (Luke 3:8; John 8:40), and they were “of Satan” in that they had rejected Jesus Christ (John 8:44). Jesus dealt with many such religious leaders, as did the apostle Paul (Matthew 23; Acts 18:6). In fact, Paul differentiates “true” (spiritual) Jews from those who can only claim a physical connection to Abraham: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Romans 2:28-29).

Adding weight to the latter view is the fact that Polycarp was martyred in Smyrna around A.D. 155. At Polycarp’s trial, the unbelieving Jews of Smyrna joined with the pagans in condemning him to death. Eusebius writes that “the Jews, being especially zealous . . . ran to procure fuel” for the burning (The Ecclesiastical History 4:15).

After commending the church in Smyrna for their spiritual victories, Jesus warned of coming persecution: “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” (Revelation 2:10). Some of the church members would be imprisoned, and this wave of persecution would last for ten days. However, Jesus gives hope to His church: “Do not be afraid,” He says. The Smyrnan believers would have the courage to face the trial (Matthew 5:11-12).

Jesus calls them to remain faithful in their suffering: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10). Here, a specific crown is mentioned for those who die as a result of suffering for Christ. This same “martyr’s crown” is also mentioned in James 1:12: “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”

Jesus makes a final promise to the believers in Smyrna: “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death” (Revelation 2:11). The overcomers, or “conquerors,” refer to all believers (1 John 5:4-5). The second death is a reference to the final judgment of the wicked (Revelation 20:6, 14; 21:8). Believers will not be hurt “at all” by that judgment; their sin was judged at the cross, and, in Christ, there is no more condemnation (Romans 8:1).

Pergamum – helped Rome to defeat other Kings to earn them “special favor”. Jesus is reminding them that “HE” and not the Roman Governor, holds the power of life and death. Letter focuses on false teachers in the church. Pergamum faced external as well as internal opposition. Pergamum not surprisingly appears among the cities some Jews though slated for divine destruction.

The message to the Pergamene church was from the Lord Jesus Christ, specifically addressed to the “angel” (or “messenger”) of the church: “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword’” (Revelation 2:12). This was not John’s message to the believers at Pergamum; it was a message from Jesus Christ. The depiction of Jesus holding a sharp, two-edged sword refers to the Lord’s readiness to bring judgment (cf. Revelation 1:16).

First, Jesus affirms the church’s positive actions: “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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives” (Revelation 2:13). The Pergamene believers lived in a difficult place, surrounded by pagan influences, yet they held fast to Christ’s name and did not deny Him during difficult times.

One Christian in Pergamum named Antipas is mentioned as a “faithful witness.” Church tradition says that Antipas was a physician suspected of secretly propagating Christianity. The Aesculapians (members of the medical guild) accused Antipas of disloyalty to Caesar. Upon being condemned to death, Antipas was placed inside a copper bull, which was then heated over a fire until it was red-hot.

The church was not perfect, however, and Jesus took note of their sin: “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (Revelation 2:14-15). The “teaching of Balaam” is explained in the context, as Christians were eating food that had been sacrificed to idols (religious compromise) and committing sexual immorality (moral compromise). The original Balaam’s deceitful work is described in Numbers 25:1-3 and Numbers 31:15-16. The Nicolaitans are mentioned only in this letter and in the letter to the Ephesian church (Revelation 2:6). They were likely a group similar to those who held the teachings of Balaam, though the exact nature of their doctrine and practice is unknown.

Jesus then issues a clarion call to repent of their sin: “Repent therefore!” (Revelation 2:16). Our Lord hates religious and moral compromise. He calls His people to live differently.

Jesus notes the judgment that would take place if the church of Pergamum did not repent: “I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Revelation 2:16b). The Nicolaitans and those who were teaching Balaam’s error would be destroyed, along with their followers, from the congregation at Pergamum. Jesus desires purity among His people, and we have a responsibility to remove false teachers from the church.

Jesus makes a final promise to the believers in Pergamum: “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17). The three blessings are hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name. The precise explanation of these three items is disputed; however, all three blessings must concern the believer’s victorious reign with Christ, consistent with the blessings bestowed on the other six churches of Revelation 2–3. The “hidden manna” is likely an allusion to the manna hidden in the Ark of the Covenant, representative of God’s faithful presence and sustenance. The “white stone” could be a reference to the stones used for entrance into temple events in ancient times or to one of the stones on the high priest’s breastplate (Exodus 28:21), although the exact meaning of the stone is uncertain.

Thyatira – economic pressures were inviting compromise on the part of Thyatira’s Christians. Jesus knows that the Christians in Thyatira, in contrast to those in Ephesus, are doing His works more than they have before. But the flaw that is offsetting this praise is that they are tolerating a false teacher of compromise. “Jezebel’s appeal: a prophet or prophetess who tells people what they want to hear can become popular.” Jezebel falsely claims to be a prophetess and to offer “deep secrets”. Like Satan, and the world system, she is a deceiver who misleads God’s servants.

The message was from the Lord Jesus Christ through an angel (or “messenger”): “To the angel of the church in Thyatira write . . .” (Revelation 2:18). This was not John’s message to the Thyatiran believers; it was a message from the Lord. The description at the end of verse 18 verifies the author of this message is Jesus Christ: “The words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.” This description removes any doubt of the identity of the One giving the message.

After identifying Himself, Jesus affirms the church’s positive actions: “I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first” (Revelation 2:19). Five qualities are listed: 1) love, 2) faith, 3) service, 4), patient endurance, and 5) greater works.

Next, Jesus notes their sin: “Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20). Apparently, a false prophetess was leading believers into compromise. The church was engaging in sexual immorality and dabbling in idolatry. It is possible that “Jezebel” was her real name, but it is more likely the name was a metaphorical reference to the Jezebel of the Old Testament—another idolatrous woman who opposed God’s ways. Rather than rebuke this false teacher and send her out of the church, the believers in Thyatira were allowing her to continue her deception.

Jesus pronounces judgment on this “Jezebel” and calls the church of Thyatira to repent of their sin: “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” (Revelation 2:22-23).

Then Jesus encourages those who had remained faithful: “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): Only hold on to what you have until I come” (Revelation 2:24-25). The faithful believers did not fall into Satan’s trap, and they only needed to remain faithful until Christ’s return.

Jesus lists His promises to the believers in Thyatira: “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’—just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star” (Revelation 2:26-28). These blessings would include 1) authority over the nations, 2) victory over all enemies, and 3) the morning star. This morning star is Jesus Himself, as Revelation 22:16 reveals. Jesus will give Himself to His church, and they will fellowship together forever.

Sardis - Sardis was one of the oldest and best defended cities in the region and the wealthy capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia.

The message to Sardis is from the Lord Jesus Christ through an angel or messenger (possibly a reference to the pastor): "To the angel of the church in Sardis write . . ." (Revelation 3:1). This was not John's message to the church at Sardis; it was a message from the Lord. The description at the end of verse 1 further verifies the author: "These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." Only Jesus has the seven spirits (or "seven-fold Spirit," meaning the complete or perfect Spirit of God), and only Jesus holds the seven stars, i.e., the seven angels (or pastors) of the seven churches (Revelation 1:20).

Jesus quickly and clearly condemns the lifeless state of the Sardian church: "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Revelation 3:2). This church may have had a good reputation, but they were spiritually lifeless. In other words, the church was filled with unsaved people going through the motions of religion. There were many tares among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30).

Jesus then calls them to repent of their sin: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you received and heard; obey it, and repent" (Revelation 3:2-3a). To "wake up" means to start paying attention to their need of salvation, to stop being careless about their heart's condition before God.

Jesus notes the judgment that would take place if they did not repent: "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" (Revelation 3:3b). A dead church, and one unrepentant in its deadness, will be disciplined by Jesus Himself.

After the warning, Jesus encourages those in Sardis who had remained faithful: "Yet you have still a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy" (Revelation 3:4). The faithful remnant had not soiled their garments (participated in sin). They are "worthy." The idea of walking worthily is also found in Paul's teaching in Ephesians 4:1; Colossians 1:10; and 1 Thessalonians 2:12. To be "worthy" is to "match up" with something—the profession of faith in the mouth matches the reality of faith in the heart. The faithful ones are promised to walk with Jesus in white (see Matthew 22:11-12; Revelation 19:8).

Jesus makes a final promise to the believers in Sardis: "He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels" (Revelation 3:5). The one who "overcomes" is anyone who is born again (1 John 5:4). The overcomer will receive a white garment (a token of righteousness), he will never have his name removed from the book of life (a promise of eternal security), and he will be confessed by Jesus in heaven (cf. Luke 12:8).

Philadelphia - Philadelphia was a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) on the Imperial Post Road, an important trade route.

The message is from the Lord Jesus Christ through an angel or "messenger" (likely a reference to the pastor): "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write . . ." (Revelation 3:7). This was not John's personal message to these believers; it was a message from the Lord, who identifies Himself as "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." This description of Jesus emphasizes His holiness, His sovereignty, and His authority. The reference to the key of David is an allusion to the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 22:22. Jesus is the one who opens and shuts, and no one can say Him nay.

Jesus affirms the church's positive actions: "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” (Revelation 3:8). The church of Philadelphia was weak in some respects, yet they had remained faithful in the face of trial. Because of this, the Lord promises them an “open door” of blessing.

Jesus’ letter then condemns the enemies of the Philadelphian believers: “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” (Revelation 3:9). Those who persecuted the believers (the persecutors were religious hypocrites in this case) would one day realize Christ loves His children. The church of Philadelphia would be victorious over its enemies.

Jesus encourages the Philadelphian believers regarding His future coming: “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown” (Revelation 3:10-11). The church’s faithful endurance would serve as a blessing. Jesus would take them to be with Him before the coming tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). He also exhorts them to remain faithful, because this would lead to rewards in the afterlife. Based on this and other passages, many Bible interpreters conclude that the rapture is an event distinct from the second coming of Christ. The fact that the Philadelphians are promised to be preserved from the time of the tribulation corresponds with the pretribulational view of the rapture.

Jesus provides a final promise to the believers in Philadelphia and to all believers: “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down from out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name” (Revelation 3:12). Professor Thomas Constable notes, “God promised that He will not just honor overcomers by erecting a pillar in their name in heaven, as was the custom in Philadelphia. He will make them pillars in the spiritual temple of God, the New Jerusalem (21:22; cf. Gal. 2:9; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-10).” (Source: Thomas Constable, Notes on Revelation at <http://soniclight.org/constable/notes/pdf/revelation.pdf>.)

So, those who struggled with weakness Jesus makes everlasting pillars in the house of God. We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). Jesus’ words of comfort certainly would have been a blessing to the Philadelphians who had faithfully stood for Christ in their pagan culture. His words continue to serve as an encouragement to faithful believers today.

Laodicea - Laodicea was a wealthy, industrious city in the province of Phrygia in the Lycos Valley.

The message is from the Lord Jesus Christ via an angel or messenger (likely a reference to the church’s pastor): “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write . . .” (Revelation 3:14). This was not simply John’s message to those in Laodicea; it was a message from the Lord. Jesus identifies Himself thus: “The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” These titles emphasize the Lord’s faithfulness, sovereignty, and power to bring all things to their proper completion (the “Amen”).

In contrast to the other six churches, the Laodicean church has nothing to commend it. Jesus begins the message with condemnation: “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” (Revelation 3:15-17). Jesus emphasizes their “lukewarm,” apathetic nature three times. As a result of their ambivalence to spiritual things, Jesus would have nothing to do with them. He would “spit them out,” as the people of Laodicea would spit out the tepid water that flowed from the underground aqueducts to their city. With their apathy came a spiritual blindness; they claimed to be rich, blessed, and self-sufficient. Perhaps they were rich in material things. But, spiritually, the Laodiceans were in a wretched, pitiful condition, made all the worse in that they could not see their need. This was a church filled with self-deceived hypocrites.

Jesus calls the Laodicean church to repent of its sin: “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” (Revelation 3:18). Their material wealth had no eternal benefit, so Jesus commands them to come to Him for true, spiritual riches (see Isaiah 55:1-2). Only Christ can supply an everlasting inheritance, clothe us in righteousness, and heal our spiritual blindness.

Jesus then notes His concern for His church in Laodicea: “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 him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:19-20). His rebuke is not born of animosity but of love. “The Lord disciplines those he loves” (Hebrews 12:6). The desired response to God’s reproof was zealous change and true repentance.

Verse 20 is often used as an evangelistic appeal, yet its original context communicates Christ’s desire for fellowship with His lukewarm church in Laodicea. The church is nominally Christian, but Christ Himself has been locked out. Rather than turn His back on them, He knocks, seeking someone to acknowledge the church’s need and open the door. If they would repent, Jesus would come in and take His rightful place in the church. He would share a meal with them, a Middle Eastern word picture speaking of closeness of relationship.

Jesus then makes a promise to the believers in Laodicea: “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Revelation 3:21). The “overcomer” refers to any believer, and the promise is that he will share Christ’s future kingdom.

In summary, the church at Laodicea had become apathetic in their love for Christ. They were allowing “the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things [to] come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful” (Mark 4:19). Christ called them to repent and live zealously for Him, to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15). The Lord Jesus issues the same call to those who say they follow Him today.

PUTTING THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION INTO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Many have attempted to make sense of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 (the letters to the seven churches of Asia) by taking them as a unified whole. It is significant that Jesus chose these particular seven congregations to address, though there were other churches in the region that were not written to (such as the church at Colosse). Additionally, some have pointed to the order of the letters as evidence of their significance as a broad explanation of church history in the period between the Ascension and Jesus to His return.

It is also interesting to note that Paul addressed seven churches: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Colosse, Phillipi, and Thessalonica (some also note with interest that Jesus gives seven “Kingdom Parables”). Early commentators on the Book of Revelation emphasized that as seven is a number of completion and fulfillment, so Jesus and Paul wrote to seven churches as an indication that they were in fact speaking to the complete church, not just these seven congregations. Speaking to seven churches means speaking to the church in perfection, in completion and totality. As one commentator puts it, “The churches of all time are comprehended in seven.”